

Public Money & Management's response to HEFCE's Second consultation on the assessment and funding of research submitted on 15 December 2009 (see www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/hefce/2009/09_38)

Reply to consultation question 1: Do you agree with the proposed key features of the Research Excellence Framework?

Public Money & Management (PMM) is a journal that is dedicated to communicating research findings to the world of practice. Its growth over the past 30 years suggests not only that its role is increasingly supported, but also that it is well placed to serve academic research that seeks to share its findings effectively with policy and practice.

Two of its editors have been members of RAE panels. We share the desire of the funding councils to include policy impact within the conceptualization of research excellence. We fear, however, that the backlash from the failure both of past RAEs and the academic research community more generally to pay appropriate attention to the needs of research users in the communities of practice may drive the REF towards an abandonment, implicit or explicit, of the fundamental value in pursuing the very best research for the impact it has on the state of knowledge for itself.

Although the general tenor of the consultative document recognizes such a knowledge impact, its conceptualization in paragraph 27 explicitly and arbitrarily limits the use of the term 'impact' to those positive 'on the economy and society', i.e. to non knowledge impacts. This limitation degrades the concept. We observe that such conceptual degradation has been a feature of social science in the past half century—consider bureaucracy, governance, quango, and customer (and that, in Canadian audit, 'impact' has been restricted to negative consequences!). But such degradation weakens our conceptual and analytical capacity. Thus we urge a more comprehensive and inclusive conceptualization of 'impact' both as policy and as concept.