

**Interdisciplinarity and institutional context:  
a commentary on the REF**

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My starting point is the belief that the social sciences can only “fulfil their potential”, to use the terminology of the Green Paper, if *social scientists ourselves*, researchers who are struggling away at the theory-data coal-face, are able to determine the ways in which the social sciences develop and are organised.

Of course, *complete* autonomy is unrealistic – as unattainable and indeed as undesirable in academic life, as in personal life. We are all always already embedded in complex networks - relationships of political, economic, social and affective interdependency - and we live out the historical legacies that structure and shape our present and our future, as researchers, as we do in the rest of our lives.

But, the social sciences need to be able to grow and change, we need to be able to reshape our driving questions, our theoretical paradigms and our methodologies, from the bottom up – through the energy and creativity of our researchers, without being held back by the structures of “research assessment”, the frameworks of that are supposed to promote, as well as to identify, “research excellence”.

Now, I think that the social sciences in the UK *are* dynamic and vibrant, and far from stuck in rut; some of the most creative thinking in global social science emanates from the UK. But this is, I think, *despite the REF* and not because of it.

Indeed, it is my belief that the REF as currently organised is in fundamental tension with the onward flow and movement, the dynamic development of the social sciences – that it places barriers and blockades in the way of the reshaping of the social sciences, and that it doesn’t allow us to really **see** the full spectrum of our current strengths and achievements, or to grasp wherein might lie our potential for development.

These HEFCE constructed barriers and blockades, which we all contribute in various ways to maintaining, don’t actually halt the flow, the inevitable transformation of the social sciences, because creative researchers and imaginative managers find ways round the barriers and blockades, and don’t let the structures of the REF dictate the frameworks within which they carry out research.

But they certainly *do* put the brakes on the process of change, and in places with less imaginative and more risk averse management, particularly those institutions that are more precariously positioned, that are more insecure about their cultural capital as research intensive institutions, they prevent both the conceptualisation and conduct of research that transcends the boundaries of disciplinary based Units of Assessment.

It is, of course, very hard to prove this – how do we ever prove that something doesn't happen, or doesn't happen to the extent it might, for a particular given reason?

But I *can* speak about the very real tensions that exist between the “framework for research excellence” established by the REF (and before it the RAE), and the organically evolving frameworks within which social science research is actually carried out. I speak here from the experience of having led research in a School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy for 5 years.

SSHP at Birkbeck is a School that does not map straightforwardly on to the REF's designation of the social sciences (Panel C), and that contains within it several departments that do not map straightforwardly on to Units of Assessment.

Two of our departments - History, Classics and Archaeology, and Philosophy - however engaged with questions, paradigms, theories and methodologies that we, and they, might recognise as “social science” – are outside the social sciences according to the REF (which meant that as Assistant Dean for Research I had to spend time seeking to decipher by means of close textual analysis the various relevant documents, in order to work out the possible differences between Panel C and Panel D impact and environment criteria).

The School also contains a department of Psychosocial Studies (of which I am research director), a department of Geography, Environment and Development Studies, and a department of Applied Linguistics and Communication – none of which have matching Units of Assessment.

Only our department of Politics speaks directly to a REF Panel C Unit of Assessment: one department in the School.

Now, I am very proud of Birkbeck's refusal to allow the REF's Unit of Assessment structure to determine how we organise our research and teaching.

When the College re-structured, back in 2008-9, establishing 5 new Schools, and within them a number of new departments, we were guided by a complex array of local, institutionally specific, and historically determined factors, prominent amongst which were those of financial viability and intellectual coherence, and absent from which was the question of “fit” with REF Units of Assessment and Panel structures.

It was this that meant that we were able to establish the first, and still the only, department of Psychosocial Studies – giving full institutional status and recognition to an emerging area of research and teaching in which the UK is leading the way.

Psychosocial Studies is a transdisciplinary endeavour that poses a fundamental challenge to the 19<sup>th</sup> century configuration of the social sciences which saw sociology and psychology established as separate disciplines, which have become more and more institutionally differentiated and separated from each other...to the extent that one now sits in Panel C and the other in Panel A

We built our new department of Psychosocial Studies from a small core group of critical, discursive and psychoanalytically orientated researchers of a social psychological and/ or

psychotherapeutic orientation who were no longer wanted by an ever more (neuro)scientifically orientated department of psychology (which was, in fact, attending quite carefully to the allocation of Psychology as a Unit of Assessment to the sciences panel in RAE 2008).

I joined this group as a sociologist whose work had taken a psychosocial turn, charged with the task of directing our new Institute for Social Research, and working out how bring the social sciences at Birkbeck together.

Over subsequent years our new department of Psychosocial Studies hired a number of exciting (largely junior) researchers and teachers who were engaged in work that has at its core an engagement with the entanglement of psychic and social life: people trained, and still identifying, as anthropologists, educationalists, gender, feminist and queer studies scholars, film, literary and cultural studies scholars, and social policy researchers, as well as more sociologists and critical psychologists and psychotherapists.

It's a heady and rather unruly mix, a contra-disciplinary collection of researchers who are pursuing a lively and intellectually challenging set of psychosocial research agendas – and whom I have had the task of presenting for assessment by the *Sociology* Unit of Assessment in the REF.

Then, added into the Birkbeck Sociology pot have been the anthropologists, cultural and social geographers, geographic information scientists, development studies researchers, and Latin American-ists, from the department of Geography, Environment and Development Studies, as well as the cultural, media and political sociologists from Film, Media and Cultural Studies in the School of Arts and from the department of Politics in my own School.

Now, I am a sociologist who has always crossed disciplinary boundaries in my own work, and yet who has also always had a strong identification with the discipline, firmly believing that the discipline has thrived through what John Urry called its scavenging or parasitical tendencies in relation to other disciplines.

So it has seemed to me perfectly legitimate to enter this multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary collection of researchers to the Sociology Unit of Assessment – and indeed we did pleasingly well in REF2014, given where we were starting from, in what was our second proper submission to Sociology.

But a not in-significant part of my inward facing work as Sociology REF lead was devoted to containing the anxieties of colleagues who had never once thought of their research as “sociology” – and who feared that they would now be required to publish in Sociology journals and to re-orient their ways of thinking and working in fundamental ways.

They had to be convinced that “doing their very best work” was all that was required of them – and that it was not a matter of writing as, or for, sociologists.

Yet, I was being somewhat disingenuous in saying that they should not seek to write for sociologists – because, of course, they were writing for sociologists – it was sociologists who were to assess them in the REF, even though we expected and hoped that a fair amount of our submission would be cross-referred to other panels.

As it turned out very little work was cross-referred by the Sociology subpanel to other subpanels.

I did not know how little would be cross-referred – but I *did know* that my colleagues were ultimately writing for the judgement of sociologists, and I had to hold my nerve on this (another large part of the job of leading a REF submission is holding back one's own anxiety as the most visible head on the block should the submission do badly), because I, and my Dean, and our Sociology REF working group, and indeed the College REF working group, were in agreement that a submission to Sociology was the best, indeed *the only*, option for this group of researchers, and that whilst we were committed to doing as well as we could in the REF, this would not be at the expense of the integrity of our research, of researchers following their intellectual curiosity, or being true to their own personal, disciplinary, methodological and theoretical allegiances and formation, and that the paths that they were heading down, and the questions and frameworks with which we were working, should not be altered by the need to submit to Sociology.

Now, I am not telling this story as some kind of heroic narrative about the integrity and higher scholarly values of research at Birkbeck, although I do think that Birkbeck is a rather unique institution that endeavours to continue down its own, somewhat counter-normative path, often against the tide of government policy, trying to hold on to its own determination of its mission, values and ways of organising our activities.

There are *many other* examples of the problems that the REF panel and subpanel structure throws up in relation to particular institutions that each have their own, singular, path-dependent, historically evolving, configuration of departments, disciplines, inter and transdisciplines.

Just next door to Birkbeck, for instance, our esteemed neighbour UCL has its own idiosyncracies. Several hundred sociologists work at UCL – scattered across numerous departments and at least five faculties – but if the academic world judges the strength and contribution of researchers to scientific knowledge and understanding on the basis of REF results, we would think that there is no sociological research conducted at UCL because UCL has never made a Sociology REF return.

This is a travesty of the state of sociology in the UK, to which UCL contributes enormously – and it offers a poor representation of the contribution of UCL to global social science, particularly to the sociologies of developing and Eastern European societies, economy and inequality, education, health and medicine, life-course, family and personal relationships, politics and social movements, science and technology, and to innovation in the development of a wide range of social research methods.

Moreover, as Chair of the Association for Psychosocial Studies, I have had discussions with colleagues from at least 10 universities who feel that their commitment to the field, their wish to write and publish in dialogue with its emerging paradigms, theories and methodologies, is being more or less actively discouraged, or even blocked, by those managing research in their departments or faculties because it is seen *not to fit* the Units of Assessment to which they must submit and in some cases from which they are being excluded.

The disciplinary power of the disciplinary structures of the REF is real and tangible, experienced in the despair and depression of these colleagues, and contributing to the narrowing of research agendas and the delimiting of challenges to the social scientific status quo.

So, what is to be done about this?

Possible options are:

- Firstly, to radically reduce, or abolish entirely, the environment narrative in REF returns – narratives which favour (at least in the minds of many university managers and the fears of individual researchers) the coherence offered by single discipline departments that map straightforwardly on to REF Units of Assessment.
- Secondly, the next REF might establish a “multi, inter- and transdisciplinary social science and humanities Unit of Assessment” that genuinely seeks panel membership from researchers who have built research careers at the interstices of disciplines and pushing forward inter- and transdisciplinary social science research, and with a view to the less than clear boundary between the social sciences and the arts and humanities.
- Thirdly, the next REF might offer positive incentives (financial or even just public commendations) to HEIs that can show real innovation in multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary research, that can demonstrate that the disciplinary structures of the REF are NOT hampering research innovation.
- And finally, and controversially, and not without its own set of unintended consequences, the next REF might require HEIs to submit *all their research active staff* – removing the enormous burden of selection, which has so many political, scientific and personal consequences - and thereby frontloading the task of shaping university and departmental research in the hands of those making academic appointments (and perhaps leading to a more rigorous system of probation or tenure review),

rather than the shaping of research resting further down the road in the hands of those trying to second guess panel preferences, who then try to mould, or even curtail, the research trajectories of the staff whom they have already chosen to appoint and whose intellectual projects should, if social science is to realise its potential, be given the space to unfold without the enormous anxiety that “fitting” into and being selected for the REF provokes for so many.

A framework for research excellence, if it is really to facilitate the realisation of research potential, needs to think more expansively about providing and rewarding structures that support and contain the breadth of research that our researchers are undertaking and might in the future undertake beyond the boundaries of the existing disciplines, and it needs to do less to generate (however unintentionally this might occur) levels of anxiety, uncertainty and insecurity amongst institutions and individuals that get in the way of the flourishing of creative and innovative research.

I will end there. Thank you for listening.

