

Unclear REF provisions stand to punish academics who take brief maternity leaves. Researchers should be allowed to submit a reduced number of outputs in line for each period of leave taken.

by Blog Admin

September 9, 2011

*As the consultation deadline for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) draws closer, **Dr Anne Haour** considers whether current provisions may penalize academics who have had children within the last funding cycle but have been unable to take more than 14 months in maternity leave to care for them. A response from **HEFCE** is also included at the end of this post.*



For academics who wish to blend both research careers and plans to start a family there is some disturbing news from **HEFCE**, the Higher Education Funding Council for England.

Every 5-6 years, all UK higher education institutions are assessed by HEFCE in a process called the **Research Excellence Framework**, known to friends as the REF. Each institution has to show how good it has been in producing ground-breaking research, looking after postgraduate students who will produce the research of the future, and making society a better place.

To evaluate their ground-breaking qualities, each academic member of staff has to present up to four 'outputs' that they have produced in the past 5-6 years (book, article, exhibition); these are assessed by a devoted panel of fellow academics, who then grade them, between zero (work that falls that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work) and four (world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour). Most people have to produce four such outputs, but people who work part-time or have only just joined the university (early career researchers) are allowed to submit fewer items, given that they are, quite reasonably, assumed to have had less time than their colleagues to research, write and curate exhibits.

So far so good, but HEFCE's latest **consultation document** throws up some considerable challenges for academics to take time out of their career to have children. It appears to suggest that no allowance will be made for maternity leave in deciding how many items should be submitted by a researcher, unless the leave lasted over 14 months. See paragraphs 49-56 in the consultation document - especially paragraph 59 and table 2.

Bearing in mind that very few people are allowed to, want to, or can afford to, take 14 months maternity leave, women who have had babies in the past 5-6 year REF cycle will have to submit four items like everyone else. The implication here is that they have been able to achieve the same research output as colleagues – which seems pretty ambitious to anyone who either has been, or knows someone who has been pregnant or a parent to infants.

As it stands, the draft proposal would seem to present a seriously discouraging picture to academics, or those who may be thinking of becoming academics. The HEFCE proposal is far out of line with our friends at the **ERC**, who extend the window of eligibility for their Starter Grants by 18 months per child born. This is thought to reflect the level of disruption to research. It also contrasts dismally with recent efforts made elsewhere, for example to bring in more women onto UK corporate boards, see the **30% club**, for example.

Indeed, the HEFCE proposal is difficult to reconcile with HEFCE's own aims to "support equality and diversity in research careers" and "encourage institutions to submit all their eligible staff who have produced excellent research" with fewer than four outputs if circumstances "have significantly constrained

[a staff member's] ability to produce four outputs or to work productively throughout the assessment period" (paragraph 47).

The HEFCE document isn't, however, entirely clear. It notes that an alternative approach could be adopted to take account of pregnancy and maternity: that staff who had periods of maternity leave during the REF assessment period may reduce the number of outputs by one for each discrete period of maternity leave, without penalty in the assessment, (paragraph 62).

"This alternative approach is based on the view that each period of maternity leave, and any associated constraints on work, is generally sufficiently disruptive of an individual's research work to merit the reduction of an output". That sounds more like it.

My view is that the fairest way to take into account maternity leave would be to allow those who have taken it during the last REF cycle to submit a reduced number of outputs, in line with the reduction allowed to Early Career Researchers where a reduction in outputs in linear relation to months away from work is allowed.

A response from HEFCE:

"The REF team, on behalf of the four UK HE funding bodies, is currently consulting on how to take account of periods of maternity and pregnancy in the REF. This consultation is contained within the draft statements of panel criteria and working methods relating to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) that are available on our website. We are committed to recognising the impact that pregnancy and maternity can have on productivity and welcome responses from the sector on a suitable approach."

If you are interested in the consultation process for REF 2014, [submit](#) your response to HEFCE before it closes on 5th October 2011.

Over the coming weeks, the [LSE Impact of Social Sciences blog](#) will be running articles on all aspects of REF 2014. If you would like to contribute to this project, email impactofsocialsciences@lse.ac.uk.

This blog post was originally posted on Dr Anne Haour's blog, [Crossroads of Empires](#).

Related posts:

1. [EU research and innovation funding consultation open](#)
2. [HEFCE are still missing a trick in not adopting citations analysis. But plans for the REF have at least become more realistic about what the external impacts of academic work are](#)