

**ARMA Protagonist  
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**Another Review, Another Opportunity?**

Amanda Solloway, the Minister for Science, Research and Innovation, announced that there is to be work on 'a plan for reforming the REF'.

Whilst trumpeting that substantive change is needed to address cultures, her speech also spoke of evolution.

Plus ça change. The current REF is the 8<sup>th</sup> generation of the UK's research assessment process, and it has evolved each time as a consequence of a review.

The REF and its predecessors have been tools for change of behaviours, moving agendas forward in ways that funders of individual projects struggle to achieve. Consider consciousness about impact, open access and EDI.

Although significant, the REF is just one process in the overall system. Effecting change needs a holistic and integrated approach. The culture, expectations and operation of planning, recruitment, probation and promotion are at least as important to address, if not more so.

The REF's rules are agnostic with respect to form and format of outputs. It's the academic community that drives the narrowness of perception. This needs academic and disciplinary leadership to step up.

I take issue with the Minister's blaming of 'universities' for REF, but I do agree with her comment that 'a risk-averse compliance culture risks stifling creativity and diversity'. The requirements (or threat perception) of audit seem to have increased. That's down to the way it is articulated and run. Are we not in a trusted relationship?

Design and operation of the REF and the like is a balancing act. We have to balance efficiency, effectiveness and popularity against each other. Similarly, approximation, simplicity and ease have to be set against precision, complexity and burden. In our efforts to be fair and inclusive, we tend towards the latter, but to what real benefit and at what cost?

So, engage with, inform and influence the review and its outcomes, through all possible means – do not wait for the formal consultation process. Raise ourselves above some of the specific detail, no matter how annoying, and address the core purposes and issues.

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