

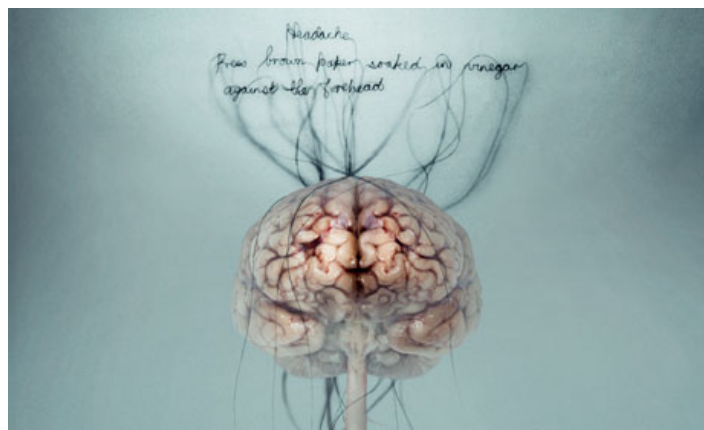
# Research that doesn't belong to single subject area is deemed 'too risky'

Academics concerned universities are excluding interdisciplinary research from the Research Excellence Framework exercise



**Claire Shaw**

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Universities promote their interdisciplinary research, but are they submitting it to the REF? Photograph: Helen Pynor/GV Art

Most university departments will be in a state of frenzy right now with the deadline for submitting to the [Research Excellence Framework \(REF\)](#) only days away. As the last Ts are crossed and Is dotted, the approaching deadline may come as a relief to those heads of departments and staff involved in the submission process. But for many [academics](#), the process to date has been pretty grim.

Dennis Leech, a professor in economics at the University of Warwick and expert on the variable outcomes of UK voting rules, submitted four [research](#) papers to the REF, all of which were rejected for being "below the standard required in terms of quality". While economics is recognised as a distinct discipline, Leech's work is interdisciplinary, spanning economics, political [science](#) and operations. Simply put, it doesn't fit into one subject area.

"The government's [policy](#) is to promote interdisciplinary research, REF itself says it makes allowances for interdisciplinary research, but universities don't seem to be doing it and regard it as a risk," says Leech.

After making a Data Protection Act request – which offers a more complete picture about an individual REF submission case – he discovered his research hadn't been flagged as interdisciplinary. The work was simply judged as economics. Three of the papers he submitted had been published in [Public Choice](#), a [highly rated interdisciplinary journal](#).

REF replaced the previous [Research Assessment Exercise \(RAE\)](#) as the system for assessing the quality of research in UK [higher education](#) institutions on the basis of three weighted factors: outputs (65% of score), impact (20%) and environment/sustainability (15%). Universities can make submissions in 36 units of

assessment, or subject areas. Their research is then assessed by an expert sub-panel in each of these areas. The REF will determine the research funding that each university receives, which will be announced in December 2014.

"The REF framework suggests a straitjacket set of incentives that you must fit into," says Leech. Young people are going to see disincentives to straying outside familiar boundaries, which will have a "tremendous effect" on the quality of UK research, he believes.

The University College Union, for which Leech is Warwick joint president, claimed last month that interdisciplinary research at Warwick was being frequently excluded from the REF submissions process. A spokesperson for the university denies this, responding: "If anyone has failed to notice that the university not only values interdisciplinary research, but has in fact actually built its research strategy around it, then they have not been paying much attention." The university also credits its interdisciplinary approach for the significant increase in grant money it received for the last academic year.

Yet Leech is not alone in worrying about the effect of the REF on interdisciplinary research. Paolo Palladino, a professor in history at Lancaster University and active voice in the interdisciplinary community of history and social studies of science has also been excluded from the REF, and says the "culture of secrecy" around the submission process is a real problem.

Palladino says: "Staff are tied even more tightly to departments at the very same time as those departments, acting on current experience, are forced by exercises like REF to become synonymous with disciplines. I am now being asked effectively to abandon my interdisciplinary commitments for research that meets with the approval of REF."

In response, a spokesperson for Lancaster University, says: "Individuals have been communicated with on a one-to-one basis at department level regarding the status of their outputs. Lancaster has a strong and longstanding commitment to interdisciplinary work and will submit it to the REF where it is considered to be part of a body of work that is internationally excellent in quality."

Palladino predicts a bleak future for interdisciplinary research, which he says will end up being conflated with cross-disciplinarity, so that any collaboration between academics in different disciplines is defined as delivering interdisciplinarity.

Semantics aside, there's no denying this complex issue is only gaining traction. So how do senior management view interdisciplinary research? Kevin Schurer, pro vice-chancellor at the University of Leicester and a professor in history, says, "some interdisciplinary research may present too much of a risk to be submitted, in that it is not strong enough in any single discipline to attract a grade which reflects the research underpinning it."

Schurer himself is no stranger to the problems of getting interdisciplinary research submitted: "In the last Research Assessment Exercise, I had two such pieces crossing the sciences and humanities which, despite being in highly-rated science journals and being relatively well-cited, were not submitted because they may not have been well-received by the history panel, due to relative small level of history content, and were thought too risky to cross-refer to the biological sciences panel, as the research was not central to that unit either."

These views fit with the reputation of higher education as a risk-averse sector. But the issue goes far beyond the university itself. Research councils, while favouring interdisciplinary research when it enables them to distribute shared funding, are still subject to clearly defined boundaries between disciplines. Some academics argue that this makes them part of the problem and leads to the generation of unequal funding streams.

And then there's the debate around definitions of 'quality', which John Holmwood, professor of sociology at the University of Nottingham, sees as an "issue of disciplinary organisation and power", one that reflects the changing policy environment for funding research.

Holmwood believes interdisciplinary research challenges disciplinary hierarchies through the creation of new forms of critical knowledge, such as gender studies, postcolonial studies, cultural studies, none of which are acknowledged in the impact agenda for REF.

For Holmwood, one of the main things that goes against interdisciplinary research is the way research is assessed in the REF through the construction of small scale subject panels. He explains: "The problem is where someone has to be a judge of work in an area where there is no representative of the area to temper any negative judgement," adding that "the size of REF subject panels make this likely to be the case".

Another common worry is the impact this will have on research innovation and those early career researchers trying to forge a career path in academia. With a drive to publish in high impact journals, Elizabeth Dzeng, a PhD student at the University of Cambridge, says there is a concern that researchers won't stay true to their own understanding of quality research and conform to a journal's definition of quality in the hope of getting published.

With a [2012 study showing](#) that top ranking journals "span a less diverse set of disciplines than lower ranking journals", this could disincentivise young researchers engaging in interdisciplinary research.

The sacrifice of academic freedom is a big price to pay, not just for interdisciplinary researchers but academia at large. As for Dzeng, she has come to understand the path she needs to take to get published, where the manuscripts she submits to medical journals will need to be written through a more "objectivist mindset", rather than through the "interpretative framework" that she feels is more appropriate for her project.

*Share your thoughts on the effect of the REF on interdisciplinary research in the comments below.*

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