

Key decisions

By the REF 2021 Steering Group¹

The three documents published today comprise the [final guidance and criteria for the Research Excellence Framework 2021](#). These documents have been developed through an iterative consultative process and build on the recommendations set out in [Lord Stern's independent review of the REF](#), as well as [extensive evaluative work carried out by the four UK funding bodies](#). In July 2018 we published these documents in draft form for consultation and received almost 300 written responses, in addition to feedback offered at various consultation events held across the UK. The responses have been invaluable in shaping our decision-making and we are grateful to those individuals, institutions and organisations that participated. Below we have set out some of the key considerations for the funding bodies raised in the consultation and the related decisions. This document should be read alongside the 'Guidance on submissions' and 'Panel criteria and working methods'.

Staff

Significant responsibility for research

One of the most significant changes proposed in the Stern Review was the recommendation that all research-active staff should be returned in the REF. This approach provides a more accurate picture of research currently undertaken in the UK and addresses the concerns, identified by Lord Stern, about career choices, progression and morale related to exclusion from the exercise.

In 2017 we consulted on how this would work in practice. We received strong feedback from the sector that, while contractual status will identify the majority of academic staff who have a significant responsibility for research, there are a substantial number of staff on teaching and research contracts who have more significant responsibility for other activities, including knowledge exchange, professional practice, and scholarship.

As a result, we introduced a process that enables HEIs to work with their staff to identify who has significant responsibility for research. We are keen to reiterate that this should be a process of *identifying* staff with significant responsibility, not of *selecting* those staff to be submitted. It remains our requirement that all research-active staff will be submitted. To help institutions to meet this requirement, we have provided further guidance on some aspects of this policy, including:

- *determining research independence of those on teaching and research (T&R) contracts.* A small number of responses to the consultation questioned our assumption that the majority of staff on T&R contracts are independent researchers. We have therefore updated the guidance to make it clear that staff on T&R contracts who are not independent researchers should be identified through the processes that the HEI has put in place to identify staff with significant responsibility for research.

- *variation by unit of assessment.* In the 'Draft Guidance on submissions' (Draft GOS), we set out a provision for HEIs to vary their processes and criteria for identifying staff with significant responsibility by unit of assessment. This is to allow for disciplinary differences, recognising that employment practices in nursing, for example, may look very different from those in mathematics. It is not intended to cover inconsistencies that exist at a purely departmental level, for example those based on historic staffing policies.
- *staff on non-academic contracts.* As in REF 2014, only those members of staff on T&R or 'research only' contracts may be submitted. Staff on any other type of contract, including senior managers, are not eligible for submission. This policy is consistent with the previous assessment exercise and reflects the funding bodies' intention to capture the research of those employed by an institution to undertake independent research.
- *staff whose responsibility for research has changed during the REF cycle.* We consider a member of staff who moves from a Category A eligible contract to a non-eligible contract (e.g. takes up an administrative or senior management role) to be a former member of eligible staff. Their outputs that were first made publicly available while employed as Category A eligible are therefore eligible for submission. Staff members who remain on a Category A eligible contract but no longer have significant responsibility for research on the census date are not considered to be former staff members, since they still belong to the eligible staff pool.
- *staff based in overseas units.* In the Draft GOS we proposed that academic staff who are employed by the submitting HEI and based in a discrete department or unit outside the UK should not be eligible to be submitted to the REF. In REF 2014 these staff were eligible only if the HEI demonstrated that the primary focus of their research activity on the census date was clearly and directly connected to the submitting unit based in the UK. Only a small number of institutions took up this facility and only a small number of such staff were returned. Consultation responses on this issue were mixed.

However, strong arguments were put forward that this proposal may disproportionately affect some submissions and may not allow the best presentation of research in some discipline areas, such as tropical medicine. We have therefore decided that academic staff who are employed by the submitting UK HEI and who are based in a discrete department or unit outside the UK are eligible, as long as the primary focus of their research activity on the census date is clearly and directly connected to the submitting unit based in the UK. In assessing this, HEIs should be guided by the indicators suggested for evidencing a substantive connection to the submitting UK institution.

Independent researchers

Following feedback on REF 2014, we have worked with the panels to develop more detailed guidance, including a range of indicators to help HEIs to identify which of their research-only staff are independent researchers. For the purposes of the REF, we define independent researchers as

individuals who are employed to undertake self-directed research, rather than carrying out another individual's research programme. We do not expect this to cover research undertaken by individuals outside their contracted responsibilities. On the basis of this definition, we expect that the majority of postdoctoral research assistants employed on project or programme grants will not be eligible for submission, unless they have significant input into the design of the research or lead a substantial or specialised work package.

Publishing the names of staff submitted to REF 2021

Concerns were raised in the consultation about the extent to which it would be possible to identify staff who are submitted without the minimum of one output, through both the environment data and the information published at the end of the exercise. In response, we have limited the standard analyses provided to panels so that they now show data on the distribution of outputs only between one and five outputs (rather than including zero). We have also taken the decision not to publish the list of staff submitted at the end of the exercise. In addition to protecting the identity of those with exceptional circumstances, this decision is consistent with Lord Stern's recommendation that the REF should focus on the submitting unit, rather than the individual researcher.

Outputs

Non-portability

A number of respondents to the consultation asked why the eligibility of the outputs of former staff is based on the date when the output was first made publicly available. In developing the detailed policy around this, we explored a number of options for linking the output to the submitting HEI, including using the date of submission and the date of acceptance for publication. However, the alternatives posed considerable challenges in implementation, since institutions have not been collecting this information throughout the publication period. It is an aspect of the policy that we will undoubtedly revisit when considering the arrangements for the next assessment exercise.

In July 2018 we consulted on our proposal to make ineligible the outputs of former staff who have been made redundant (except where the staff member has taken voluntary redundancy). Opinions were divided on this question in the consultation. Those who agreed expressed support for the rationale.

However, a number of responses raised some significant issues, including the potential need for HEIs to share sensitive information about staff employment with those responsible for selecting outputs. Meetings with the academic panels subsequently highlighted the complexity of the issue, with several panel members asking how this would affect those employed on fixed-term contracts. Such staff – very often early career researchers on research fellowships – are usually considered to be made redundant at the end of their contract if their service extends beyond two years. Concerns were raised that disallowing their outputs would disincentivise institutions from employing these individuals. We carefully considered whether an exception could be made for fixed-term contracts; however, it was agreed that this could equally provide an incentive for HEIs to move staff onto fixed-term contracts and, in doing so, increase the precariousness of academic employment.

Having considered the balance of arguments, the funding bodies have decided to permit the submission of the outputs of former staff made redundant because of significant unintended consequences of doing otherwise. However, we recognise that allowing the submission of these outputs may itself have unintended consequences for individuals. We therefore encourage institutions to consider carefully their approach to submitting the outputs of former staff who have since been made redundant. In particular, they should reflect on whether it is compatible with the intentions of the policy of non-portability, which seeks to recognise the investment made by institutions and reduce game-playing. HEIs will be required to set out their approach to selecting outputs, including those of former staff, in their codes of practice and in the unit of assessment environment statements, and the funding bodies intend to look closely at this issue in their post-REF analysis.

Co-authored outputs

The consultation returned a variety of views on the principle of allowing the same output to be returned more than once in a single submission. The majority supported the proposed intention to permit the submission of co-authored outputs only once within the same submission, which represents the work of the unit rather than individuals. However, a significant number of respondents were uncertain about the proposal or considered that there should be exceptions to the policy.

Based on discussions with the sector and the panels, the funding bodies feel that there are sufficient disciplinary differences to merit variations in the policy, and we support Main Panel D's decision to accept the inclusion of the same co-authored output twice in a submission. Publication patterns in the arts and humanities, along with the composition of many of Main Panel D's units of assessment, mean that units submitting in this area may have greater constraints on the size of their output pool. The panel's decision to limit to five per cent the proportion of outputs that may be submitted more than once will ensure that units are able to demonstrate the breadth of their research.

Open access

The consultation raised some concerns about the application of the five per cent tolerance band for small submissions to a UOA – it was pointed out that a minimum of 20 in-scope outputs would be required before the tolerance would come into effect. We have therefore amended the guidance so that units may submit a maximum of five per cent non-compliant in-scope outputs, *or one non-compliant in-scope output*, whichever is higher, per submission to a UOA. Some responses also called for the tolerance band to be applied at HEI, rather than UOA submission level. However, given the varying discipline profiles between different HEIs, the main panel chairs advised that applying the band at HEI level may be unfairly advantageous to some HEI types. We therefore agreed to retain the tolerance band at UOA submission level.

Interdisciplinary research

The draft guidance and criteria published in July set out a number of measures intended to provide HEIs with confidence that interdisciplinary outputs will be assessed in a fair and consistent manner in REF 2021. We received feedback through the consultation that the processes set out in these documents were not always clear and that it was not obvious to HEIs how they would work in practice. In the final guidance and criteria we have attempted to provide clarification in a number of areas,

including how the interdisciplinary flag will be used both by the panels in their assessment processes and by the funding bodies in their post-exercise analysis. We are keen to stress that there are no advantages or disadvantages to flagging an output as interdisciplinary and that there will be no negative consequences where a sub-panel considers that an output has been incorrectly flagged. More information on the development of these measures will be provided in the report of the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel, which will be published in spring 2019.

Other

UOA 4 cost allocation pilot

In July we set out proposals to capture data on the differing balances of research activity cost for outputs submitted in UOA 4. Alongside the consultation, the REF team also ran a pilot exercise to assess the feasibility of the approach. Feedback from the 61 participating HEIs suggested that the process of assigning cost activity to outputs was moderately straightforward.

Responses to the consultation were mixed. While a few respondents outlined express support for seeking to capture costs in some way for this UOA, a significant minority of respondents, including key bodies within UOA 4's subject communities, set out clear reservations. Several respondents were opposed to the principle of using REF to capture information on funding and expressed some related concerns that it may lead to an alignment of cost and quality in the assessment. Over a third of respondents highlighted concerns about unintended consequences, suggesting that the proposed approach could skew HEIs' output selection and potentially distort investment and research focus in these disciplines more widely.

After extensive discussion of risks and benefits, Sub-panel 4 advised the funding bodies that the differentiation of research cost by output does not have sufficiently broad support from the community to proceed. This view was supported by Main Panel A. As a result, we have decided not to pursue this approach.

Notes

1 The REF Steering Group comprises members of each of the UK higher education funding bodies (the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Research England, and the Scottish Funding Council). It is chaired by the Director of Research at Research England and serviced by representatives from the REF team.

The group has responsibility for matters of policy and the programme of work, agreeing collective recommendations on the high-level framework and putting these forward to the boards of the funding bodies. The Steering Group signs off key guidance developed by the REF team, provides oversight of key implementation risks, and agrees the draft REF budget to put forward for approval from the funding bodies. The group also draws the REF team's attention to matters of importance or sensitivity within the devolved territories, and acts as the final arbiter in REF 2021-related appeals or disputes.