

Higher Education Funding Council for England

Title	Initial decisions on REF 2021
To	Heads of HEFCE-funded higher education institutions Heads of higher education institutions in Northern Ireland Heads of higher education institutions in Scotland Heads of higher education institutions in Wales Heads of alternative providers in England
Of interest to those responsible for	Research, Planning
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Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

Initial decisions on REF 2021

1. This letter directs readers to information about the initial decisions on the next Research Excellence Framework (REF). The initial decisions follow the four UK higher education funding bodies' recent 'Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework' (HEFCE2016/36, www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2016/201636/). This consultation sought views on our proposed approach to implementing the recommendations of Lord Stern's independent review of the exercise (available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>), along with a number of detailed points informed by our evaluation of REF 2014.

2. Further evidence and discussion are required on some aspects of the framework before the funding bodies can take final decisions. This letter sets out further information on these aspects, and how views on these issues can be submitted to us.

Responses to the consultation

3. We received 388 responses to the consultation. The responses contained many thoughtful and constructive points across the range of proposals that we set out, and we thank those who submitted responses. The detailed summary of responses is being finalised for publication, and will be available shortly on our website.

4. Overall, responses were supportive of the vision of the REF outlined in the Stern review recommendations. In particular, there was overwhelming support for maintaining continuity of approach through an exercise based on peer review, informed by metrics where appropriate, and assessing outputs, impact and environment. Responses broadly welcomed proposals aimed at increasing institutions' flexibility in building submissions, and at moving the focus of the exercise more from the individual to the institution; but were also keen to underline the importance of measures to promote equality and diversity in doing so. The sector also welcomed the increased

focus on interdisciplinary research, and the proposals aimed at deepening and broadening impact in the REF.

5. Questions and concerns were raised around some of the mechanisms outlined to implement Stern's recommendations. These concerns included a lack of clarity around the proposals for assessing impact at the institutional level, and the proposed approach to submitting staff and output portability. These are outlined in further detail in paragraphs 10 to 20 (below). In considering some of the implementation issues, respondents questioned the extent to which burden could be minimised through the overall exercise.

Initial decisions

6. Informed by the responses to the consultation, the funding bodies have taken decisions on a number of high-level aspects of the framework. These decisions are set out in detail in the document 'Initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework 2021' (REF2017/01, www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2017/ref201701/). We are also inviting applications for the sub-panel chair positions. Further information on these roles, and how to apply, is available at Annex B of REF2017/01.

7. The main aspects not included in the high-level decisions are the approaches to submitting staff, output portability and the eligibility of institutions to participate in the REF. Further information about these aspects is outlined in paragraphs 10 to 20 (below). We intend to take decisions on these, and further aspects related to staff and output submission (including the average, minimum and maximum number of outputs), in the autumn, following further evidence and discussion.

Impact

8. The funding bodies have also reviewed the overall weightings of the three assessment elements in the exercise. In so doing, we have taken account of Lord Stern's suggestion that impact be 'deepened and broadened', and of the previous intention to increase the impact weighting to 25 per cent as originally proposed for REF2014. We have also taken account of discussions with the UK Government's Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy on how the impact element of the REF could support the industrial strategy. We have considered these factors alongside the case for maintaining consistency, which was set out in HEFCE2016/36.

9. When we introduced impact in REF 2014, the reduction of the weighting to 20 per cent was appropriate for that exercise in view of the developmental nature of the impact assessment process. The success of impact in 2014 was demonstrated in the subsequent evaluation activity and highlighted in Lord Stern's review. Recognising the importance of REF-driven funding in supporting the industrial strategy, we intend to implement our original intention to increase the weighting of impact to 25 per cent in this exercise. In reviewing the weighting of the remaining elements, we have considered the overall volume of information that will be required in the environment arising from our initial decisions, as set out in REF2017/01. In view of this, we consider that there should not be a reduction in the weighting of environment. The weightings are therefore as follows:

- outputs – 60 per cent
- impact – 25 per cent
- environment – 15 per cent.

Staff submission and output portability

10. The recommendation in the Stern review to return to the REF all staff who have a significant responsibility to undertake research stems primarily from discussion of the deleterious career effects on those who aspired to a successful research career but were omitted from the exercise. The principle of an all staff submission was broadly accepted in consultation responses, and we accept and will implement the Stern recommendation.

11. The majority of respondents, however, raised issues with our proposal to use contract status as the basis for identifying staff with significant responsibility for research, and we accept that no single indicator identifies those within the scope of the exercise. We recognise that in many research-intensive institutions this approach will identify the majority of academic staff who have a significant responsibility for research; but we note that in many other institutions there are staff who have more significant responsibility for other activities, including knowledge exchange, professional practice, and scholarship.

12. We are therefore engaging in further dialogue with the sector to finalise the details of an alternative approach whereby HEIs, working with their staff and with guidelines, identify who is in scope for submission among staff meeting core eligibility criteria. We set out this approach in a recent webinar, which can now be accessed on our website at www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/ref2021/events/, and the proposal is also summarised in a post by David Sweeney on the HEFCE blog.

13. This approach sets out an option for institutions to submit 100 per cent of staff meeting the core eligibility criteria. These institutions will avoid the additional burden of implementing, and documenting in a code of practice, processes to identify those staff among the eligible group who do not have significant responsibility for research and hence are not in scope. Institutions may return 100 per cent in certain units of assessment (UOAs) only; for any other UOAs in which they submit, they must document and follow a process, as outlined below (paragraph 14).

14. Where institutions need to determine who is in scope, they will need to document in a code of practice the processes they will follow to identify where staff do not have significant responsibility for research. Auditable evidence will be required to show where there is no expectation that staff have this significant responsibility, such as workload models or career pathways. We invite feedback on the details required to finalise this approach, and set out in Annex A some questions that institutions may wish to consider.

15. Responses to the consultation set out clear arguments on the unsuitability of using HESA cost centres to map staff into UOAs. Responsibility for mapping staff into UOAs will therefore remain with institutions. We are currently developing the process required in submissions to provide the context for any major variance from the HESA data.

16. The Stern review identified problematic disincentives for investment, and negative effects on staff recruitment and retention, associated with credit for outputs moving with staff in previous exercises. The review proposed that outputs should be eligible for submission only by the institution where the outputs were demonstrably generated. We accept that these issues should be addressed, and we will implement the Stern proposal in recognising investment by institutions.

17. However, we also recognise the significant concerns raised about this proposal in consultation responses, including the unintended consequences for staff mobility (particularly for

early-career researchers) and publication behaviour, and about burden, practical implementation and retrospective application. We consider that some of those concerns are well-founded, and that transitional arrangements should be developed for the 2021 exercise.

18. We are therefore seeking further views on an alternative approach to output portability arrangements. Our webinar sets out our proposals in this area, which are also summarised in the post on the HEFCE blog. Our initial discussions with the sector on possible approaches to achieving this balance have highlighted interest in a transitional approach, but some concern about the potential for burden through complex hybrid models.

19. We are seeking views on institutions' preference for either a precise but complex hybrid model or through a simpler, but less precise, approach. In the latter, outputs would be eligible for return by more than one institution, as is already the case for co-authored outputs. Annex A also includes some questions to consider in providing feedback.

20. Views should be provided by email to researchpolicy@hefce.ac.uk, by 29 September 2017. This feedback will inform the decisions to be taken by the funding bodies on these arrangements.

Eligibility to participate in the REF

21. In HEFCE2016/36, we indicated our expectation that all UK HEIs should be eligible to participate in the REF. In view of the changes to the higher education landscape, more detail will be needed on the eligibility criteria for the different types of higher education provider in England. This letter sets out HEFCE's proposed approach to determining eligibility for providers in England, and we are seeking views on this approach by 29 September 2017.

22. Among providers in England, we welcome submissions to the 2021 exercise from previously eligible, HEFCE-fundable institutions, including connected institutions. We also welcome submissions from those with university title, whether or not eligible for funding. We expect all providers submitting to the REF to have research degree provision. This includes institutions with validation, sub-contractual or franchise arrangements with other higher education institutions. Institutions wishing to participate in the exercise will also be required to meet the submission requirements that will be set out in the detailed guidance on submissions.

23. The Higher Education and Research Act (2017) sets out eligibility to receive quality-related research funding, which is informed by the outcomes of the REF, in relation to the Act's 'eligible higher education providers'. Those institutions meeting the above criteria, but not seeking eligibility for funding, will be welcome to participate as a benchmarking exercise.

24. The new Regulatory Framework of the Office for Students is due to be consulted on later this year. We expect to base the criteria for eligibility to submit to REF on the Office for Students' Register and associated Regulatory Framework, but we expect that those applying under current regulations will remain eligible for the 2021 exercise.

25. We welcome views on the above approach, by email to researchpolicy@hefce.ac.uk by 29 September. Please clearly indicate in this correspondence on whose behalf the views are provided.

Further information

26. Full details about the initial decisions are available in REF2017/01. Further information about the REF is available on our website at www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/ref2021/, including details of the sub-panel chair application process at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2017/ref201701/.

27. The summary of responses to the consultation will be available on our website shortly.

28. Views on our proposed approaches to staff submission, output portability and eligibility to participate in the REF should be submitted by email, to researchpolicy@hefce.ac.uk, by 29 September 2017.

Yours sincerely

Professor Madeleine Atkins

Chief Executive

Annex A: Questions on staff and output portability

1. We are seeking feedback on the details required to finalise our outlined alternative approach to identifying staff who have a significant responsibility for research, and our proposed alternative approaches to output portability.
2. We have outlined below some questions that institutions may wish to consider in providing their views. Comments should be submitted by email to researchpolicy@hefce.ac.uk by 29 September 2017. Further information about these proposals is available in the webinar hosted on 19 July, and as summarised in David Sweeney's recent posts on the HEFCE blog.

Identifying staff with a significant responsibility for research

3. As set out in HEFCE Circular letter 33/2017, many respondents to the consultation raised concern about the proposed approach to use contract status alone as the basis for identifying staff with significant responsibility for research. We are therefore engaging in further dialogue with the sector to finalise the details of an alternative approach whereby HEIs, working with their staff and with guidelines, identify who is in scope.
4. The alternative approach sets out four criteria that collectively identify staff in scope for inclusion. Staff:
 - have an academic employment function of 'research only' or 'teaching and research'
 - are independent researchers
 - hold minimum employment of 0.2 full-time equivalent
 - have a substantive connection to the submitting institution.
5. Institutions may put in place processes to determine whether staff who meet these criteria do or do not have a significant responsibility for research. We are interested in views on any additional guidance that would be necessary to enable institutions to develop these processes. For example, are there generic key attributes that could identify staff with significant responsibility for research?

6. For clarity, research assistants will not be considered to meet the above criteria unless, exceptionally and demonstrably, they are deemed to be independent researchers.
7. In response to consultation feedback, we will work with the main panels to provide further guidance appropriate to the discipline areas on the definition of an 'independent researcher'. This will build on a generic definition, developed from that used in REF 2014 (undertaking 'independent research, leading or acting as principal investigator or equivalent on a research grant or significant piece of research work'.)¹ We are interested in views on whether there are further characteristics of independent researchers, common across the main panels, that could be incorporated into the generic guidance.

¹ Assessment framework and guidance on submissions' (REF 02.2011, www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/2011-02/), paragraph 85b.

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8. We are also interested in any additional views or comments on the details of this approach, to support the funding bodies in finalising their decisions in this area.

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Output portability

9. We have presented two options for putting in place transitional arrangements relating to output portability, to ensure the originating institution receives credit for outputs while also seeking to address concerns raised in the consultation about researcher mobility and the practical implementation of the proposal. These options are briefly summarised as:

- a. The simplified model, whereby outputs would be eligible for return by the originating institution (i.e. the institution where the research output was demonstrably generated and at which the member of staff was employed) *as well as* by the newly employing institution.
- b. The hybrid approach, with a deadline (to be determined), after which a limited number of outputs would transfer with staff, with eligibility otherwise linked to the originating institution. (This would mean operating two rules for portability in this exercise: the outputs of staff employed before the specified date falling under the 2014 rules of full portability; outputs from staff employed after this date would fall under the new rules.)

10. While both options seek to address the aims set out in the Stern review and the issues raised in consultation responses, the potential complexity and burden indicated in paragraph 7b needs to be considered against the less precise approach offered in paragraph 7a. We are interested in views on which of these options is preferable, and the rationale for this preference.

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11. With reference to your preferred option, what are the challenges relating to implementation that need to be taken into account in developing the approach?