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Research Excellence Framework: Codes of Practice on the selection of staff

A report on good practice by the Equality and Diversity
Advisory Panel (EDAP)

Foreword by the Panel Chair

In 2009, I chaired the Equality Challenge Unit Steering Group that assessed the impact of RAE 2008 on equality and diversity. Our work revealed that whilst there was evidence of some very good practice across the sector, many institutions produced Codes of Practice that did little more than meet minimum standards, and that were not communicated widely or applied effectively. It is pleasing to see how much we have moved on since that time. Through establishing the Equality & Diversity Advisory Group and subsequently Advisory Panel, the UK Funding Bodies have shown a real commitment to fully embedding equality and diversity within REF. This commitment is clear from the detailed guidance that has been produced for institutions, both by the Funding Bodies and the Equality Challenge Unit.

I read all the REF Codes of Practice that were submitted for review in April and July, and was struck by the overall improvement over those that were produced for RAE 2008. Whilst some of the Codes fell short of the required standard, many showed much more evidence of equality and diversity being embedded in institutional REF processes, and a number exemplified good practice in one or more areas that went beyond the minimum standards.

The following report contains a number of reflections from the Equality & Diversity Advisory Panel on our review of the Codes.

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Chair, Equality & Diversity Advisory Panel

Introduction

The REF Equality & Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) reviewed a total of 159 Codes of Practice and was impressed with their overall quality. The majority were judged to adhere to the guidance, although in some of these cases there were relatively minor omissions. Nearly half of the codes fell short of meeting some aspect of the guidance, but in many of these cases the shortcoming should be straightforward for the institution to remedy. Some of the codes required more substantial revision. The most common areas where the Codes tended to fall short of the guidance were in lacking detail about how the Code would be communicated to all staff, or not clearly setting out timely and independent appeals processes. A number of the Codes contained good practice that exceeded the minimum requirements in one or more aspects of the guidance.

This report draws together notable examples of good practice in relation to each of the main areas that the Codes were required to address, and outlines the areas where EDAP identified the need for improvements. Institutions might benefit from reflecting on the areas of good practice and, if appropriate, revising their practices or considering doing so in future exercises. Where EDAP found Codes that fell short of the guidance, the relevant Funding Body has corresponded directly with the institution concerned.

Underlying principles

The vast majority of the Codes noted adherence to the four main underlying principles (transparency, consistency, accountability, and inclusivity). However, some went further than this to contextualise the Code in relation to broader institutional strategies, research assessment and funding, often noting the inherent tensions involved. Others provided a good articulation of the ways in which adherence to the principles was reflected in institutional REF structures and processes. In promoting inclusivity, for example, several institutions provided strong statements on how staff could contribute to the excellence of the University in many ways and pointed out that submission of outputs to REF was only one of these. A good number of Codes made it clear that whether or not an individual's outputs were included in the submission had no further impact on decisions relating to their future support or progression in the institution. Several also outlined mentoring and support for career progression for those who were not selected for submission. Another indication of good practice noted by EDAP was that a number of the Codes also showed how adherence to the principles was deeply embedded in wider institutional support for Equality and Diversity and data protection; for example, linking the principles with other actions to reduce discrimination.

Communication

The information provided within the Codes about communication plans was variable. A number of institutions only briefly described how the Code had been (or would be) communicated to staff, and a number did not state how the Code would be communicated to staff absent from work. However, a number of others set out much fuller programmes of communication that included personalised emails to staff, web notices, and staff briefings, with a clear timeline attached. Some particularly good examples showed how the institution took account of different audience groups when determining and outlining the various channels of communication. Many were available in other accessible formats. Several of the stronger Codes also provided staff with very clear rationales for, and descriptions of, institutional selection processes and how these fitted into the wider research funding landscape. Another strong feature was that some Codes reflected how they had been produced as a result of broad and iterative consultative processes, which should result in much more 'ownership' of the Codes. More generally, many of the better Codes were very readable and showed clear thought about the intended audience and their motivation for reading the document, addressing readers directly throughout the document in a meaningful and engaging way. This contrasted with some of the weaker Codes that appeared to be aimed purely at satisfying the Funding Bodies, read more like technical manuals, and were often littered with acronyms or had key information buried in small footnotes.

Staff and Committees

Institutions were asked to detail the individuals and bodies involved in selecting staff, together with responsibilities and operating criteria. Stronger Codes in this area presented clear information about staff and committees involved in the selection process, a rationale for their involvement in the

process, together with terms of reference and lists of responsibilities, indicating where individuals and bodies had advisory roles and where they had decision-making roles. Many included helpful schematic diagrams and timelines for meetings. A number also showed the relationships between the different groups and their inter-dependencies. Less strong examples provided very little information in the Codes themselves and simply linked to details available on the institution's intranet. A few also involved only a small number of people in the decision-making processes, in some cases with just one or two individuals holding multiple roles in the process.

Training

The information documented about training was also variable. Some institutions provided little more than an acknowledgement that staff with responsibility for selection decisions would receive appropriate REF-related training. However, a good number of institutions set out very clear training plans, showing what training would be given to the different groups, outlining the content (and how this had been specifically tailored to REF) and the timescale for delivery. They made it clear that training was mandatory for all involved in selection decisions, including those who were providing advice to the main selection committee (e.g. Unit of Assessment leads), and those hearing appeals. Other examples of good practice included inviting all staff to participate in REF training events (rather than limiting this to those involved in selection decisions), leaving training materials on-line as an aide memoire, and sharing a larger training programme with a nearby institution.

Individual staff circumstances

Many institutions included a clear summary, aligned with the REF guidelines, of the equality-related staff circumstances that would be taken into account in staff selection decisions, and also documented circumstances covered by relevant employment legislation. In contrast, a smaller number fell short of the guidance, simply providing links to their intranet or the REF website. Some of the stronger Codes made it clear to staff how they could obtain further information about the various circumstances and their implications for REF. Good Codes in this area set out a very clear account of institutional disclosure processes, and how disclosed information would be handled and taken into account in the selection process. Codes that showed high regard for ensuring confidentiality were particularly welcomed by EDAP. In this regard, a few institutions consulted staff on proposed procedures for handling individual circumstances and treating sensitive personal information confidentially, before Codes were finalised. Specific examples of good practice included having a confidential channel for disclosure outside Department or Unit of Assessment structures, the use of a centralised panel for considering staff circumstances (which was separate from the selection decision-making panel), and anonymised disclosure forms. Two institutions included a helpful FAQ section linked to the disclosure form. Finally, a number of Codes included information on how decisions relating to potential reductions in outputs would be communicated to staff, how this linked in with the appeals process, and how decisions would be monitored.

Appeals

This was an area where a number of Codes fell short of the guidance, for example by establishing processes that lacked sufficient independence, so that staff involved in selection decisions were also involved in hearing appeals, or where there was no assurance that appeal outcomes could be implemented before the submission deadline. In contrast, examples of good practice in this area included the use of an early-stage informal route, clear information about the independence and integrity of the individuals involved in hearing appeals cases, confirmation that appeals panels had received appropriate REF-related training, clear information on justifiable grounds for appeal, and clear timelines. EDAP particularly welcomed institutions setting up REF-specific appeals panels, rather than invoking their standard grievance procedures. Overall, EDAP expressed some concern about the wide degree of variability in appeals processes and felt that, with hindsight, the Funding Bodies could usefully have provided more detailed guidance in this area.

Equality Impact Assessment

Although institutions were not required to include information on their Equality Impact Assessments (EIAs) in their Codes of Practice, many did so. Good examples of this showed how the ongoing EIA had informed development of the Code, and documented the broad range of information that was being taken into account when conducting the EIA, the particular stages at which data would be analysed, how any positive or potential negative impacts would be identified and acted on, and how the final EIA would be communicated and published. In the later round of submitted Codes, a few EIAs also showed evidence of changing particular processes as a result of outcomes of the initial impact assessments that had been carried out. A number of institutions also included information on the actions that had been taken as a result of the EIA conducted on their RAE 2008 submission process and outcomes; some included this in the description of their ongoing impact assessment, whereas others included it in the introductory text of the Code itself.

Final Comment

The majority of institutions have clearly invested a lot of effort in putting in place appropriate procedures for ensuring that fair and transparent processes are used in relation to the selection of staff for REF2014 and in documenting these in their Codes of Practice. It is important that institutions continue to reflect on their practices, and the effects of these, as they implement their Codes during the coming months. It is essential that the rigorous standards and processes outlined in the Codes are fully implemented in practice as selection decisions are made. EDAP will be advising the Funding Bodies on how the impact of REF on equality and diversity should be evaluated in the longer term, particularly focusing on the extent to which Codes are appropriately implemented within institutions.