

Equality Impact Assessment for the Research Excellence Framework 2021

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Background

1. The four UK higher education funding bodies have a clear aim to mainstream and support equality and diversity in the research environment. This document sets out how equality and diversity issues have been taken into account in determining the key policy decisions relating to the Research Excellence Framework (REF). This document accompanies the documents 'Initial Decisions on REF 2021' (REF 2017/01) and 'Decisions on staff and outputs' (REF 2017/03).
2. The Research Excellence Framework is the system for assessing research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It was first conducted in 2014, and replaced the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The REF will be undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies¹. The exercise will be managed by the REF team based at HEFCE and overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the four UK higher education funding bodies.
3. The funding bodies' shared policy aim for research assessment is to secure the continuation of a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum of UK higher education. We expect that this will continue to be achieved through the threefold purpose of the REF:
 - to provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment
 - to provide benchmarking information and establish reputational yardsticks, for use in the higher education sector and for public information
 - to inform the selective allocation of funding for research.
4. The conduct of the exercise is governed by the following principles:

Equity – the fair and equal assessment of all types of research and forms of research output.

Equality – promoting equality and diversity in all aspects of the assessment.

Transparency – the clear and open process through which decisions are made and information about the assessment process is shared.

¹ The four UK higher education funding bodies are the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE).

Key impacts identified

5. A series of reports, evaluations and datasets on the subject of equality and diversity in the REF have indicated the need to review and update policy to ensure that equality and diversity considerations are at the forefront of policy decision-making. The following sources have been utilised to identify the areas of potential impact and therefore the policy areas due for review:

- the REF 2014 impact assessment
- information contained in equality and diversity (E&D) briefings and training carried out in preparation for the 2014 exercise
- data on staff submissions for the 2014 exercise and how this compares with representativeness across the sector
- data on panel representativeness for the 2014 exercise and how this compares with representativeness across the sector
- the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP)'s final report on the equality and diversity aspects of the 2014 exercise, and its report on institutional codes of practice on staff selection for REF 2014
- information contained in the environment statements submitted in 2014 (including the report on this by the Careers Research and Advisory Centre (CRAC))
- consultation responses regarding REF 2021
- the 'Metric tide' report
- any relevant higher education sector data already held by HEFCE analytical services.

6. In an equality impact assessment for the 2014 REF exercise, potential for negative impact was identified for active researchers in all nine groups protected by equalities legislation². It was determined that researchers from protected groups may be affected by selection or non-selection for an institution's submission or to a REF panel, and that this could potentially have implications for their career progression.

7. The 2014 impact assessment document drew on research into RAE2008 to highlight differences in selection rates for submissions and panels across several protected characteristics, including gender, ethnicity (specifically for staff in the black ethnic group), age and disability. Difficulties in the underlying data used in monitoring staff selection by HEIs for RAE 2008 meant that the full extent of impact on researchers who were gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or of other minority sexualities and gender identities, and on religious groups, was not available.

8. Despite an incomplete data picture, the REF 2014 impact assessment identified a series of measures to enhance HEIs' equality and diversity considerations relating to selection of staff. These included strengthening the guidance on institutional codes on practice and criteria for panel selection, setting up the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel and improving the quality of data to monitor selection.

² See www.ref.ac.uk/2014/about/background for the assessment, and <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics> for list of protected characteristics.

9. In recognition of the identified impact from the 2014 exercise, and in view of policy changes to staff submission in the 2021 exercise, the REF team (on behalf of the four UK funding bodies) has undertaken further work to identify any potential impact on individuals from protected groups. This has included consultation with the sector to identify any mitigating actions which are needed to address any potential negative impact on individuals from the protected groups, and to highlight any positive opportunities to advance equality of opportunity.

10. The key areas which have been identified as having the most impact on equality and diversity issues in the policy development process are set out below in paragraphs 11-50. This includes the nature of the anticipated impact, and the steps taken during the policy development phase to mitigate potential negative impact as a response to impact analysis and assessment.

Identifying staff with significant responsibility for research

Proposed policy

11. The policy of staff selection in REF 2014, whereby institutions and submitting units could select which research staff would and would not be submitted to REF, raised concerns about the deleterious effect this might have on those who aspired to a successful research career, but were omitted³.

12. The independent review of the REF 2014 exercise, led by Lord Stern, made the recommendation to return to the REF all staff with a significant responsibility to undertake research. The principle of an all staff submission was broadly accepted in consultation responses and considered a useful way to remove the potential for disadvantage⁴.

Equality impacts identified

13. However, the majority of respondents to the consultation on Lord Stern's recommendations raised issues with the proposal to use contract status as the basis for identifying staff with significant responsibility for research. It was felt that in many research-intensive institutions this approach would identify the majority of academic staff with a significant responsibility for research, but that in many other institutions staff with more significant responsibility for other activities, including knowledge exchange, professional practice and scholarship, would also be captured using this identifier.

14. The initial proposed definition of 'research-active' staff related to those returned to the Higher Education Statistics Agency Staff Collection with an activity code of 'Academic professional' and an academic employment function of either 'Research only' or 'Teaching and research'. This was met with concern that the approach might lead to staff seeing changes to their contracts of employment that would determine whether they were eligible for submission. Consultation responses indicated that contract changes might

³ See 'Research Excellence Framework review: Building on Success and Learning from Experience' (2016), available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>.

⁴ See 'Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework: Summary of responses' (REF 2017/02), available online at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2017/consultationonthesecondresearchexcellenceframeworksummaryofresponses.html.

apply differentially to staff with protected characteristics. For example, existing evidence shows a difference in contract type by gender⁵.

Mitigations or policy changes

15. Further dialogue with the sector has been conducted to finalise an alternative approach which may avoid this potential negative impact. In this approach HEIs, working with their staff under guidelines, will be able to implement a process to identify who is in scope for submission among staff who meet core eligibility criteria. To mitigate against the potential consequence of staff contract changes, HEIs should retain a key role in identifying staff with significant responsibility for research.

16. As set out in 'Decisions on staff and outputs' (REF 2017/04), provision will be made for those institutions intending to make submission of less than 100 per cent of staff meeting the contractual definition. To ensure that the decision by HEIs to submit less than 100 per cent of staff is fair, equal, and transparent, institutions that choose not to submit 100 per cent will be asked to develop, in consultation on with staff, processes to identify those staff among the eligible group who do not have significant responsibility for research and hence are not in scope, and to document these processes in a code of practice⁶. These codes of practice will be reviewed by EDAP to ensure robust consideration of E&D issues by units submitting less than 100 per cent.

Decoupling staff from outputs in the assessment

Proposed policy

17. Lord Stern's independent review of the REF stated that the direct link between outputs and individuals returned to the REF should be broken, and recommended that outputs should be submitted at Unit of Assessment (UOA) level, with flexibility for some members of staff to submit above or below the average⁷. The intention of this proposed flexibility was to ensure that individuals whose personal circumstances have significantly constrained their ability to work productively throughout the assessment period are not required to have four outputs (as in REF 2014), to reduce the burden of staff circumstances, and to promote inter-sector mobility. It was initially anticipated that this approach would negate the need for arrangements to account for individual staff circumstances, and might contribute significantly towards deregulation in the exercise.

Equality impacts identified

18. Having a maximum number of outputs limits the extent to which staff and outputs are truly decoupled. However, having no limit could lead to submissions being based on the work of only a small number of individuals, meaning that the body of work submitted would not be representative of the work undertaken by the submitting unit. As an

⁵ Further information is available at <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/news/18-01-2018/sfr248-higher-education-staff-statistics>.

⁶ Alongside the development of codes of practice, all UK institutions will be expected to conduct their own equality impact assessments.

⁷ See paragraphs 66 to 70 of 'Research Excellence Framework review: Building on success and learning from experience' (2016), available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>.

example, with a maximum limit of six outputs, a submission including 20 individuals, (requiring 40 outputs), could in fact be based on the work of only seven members of staff.

19. Through consultation with the sector on this issue, it was determined that this could potentially lead to underrepresentation in submissions of research produced by some groups of staff (for example, early career researchers or other groups where analysis has shown differences in the rate of staff selection)⁸. Around a third of respondents to the REF consultation exercise commented on the potential impact on particular groups of researchers should there be no formal procedures to take account of staff with relevant individual circumstances. The majority view was that the current approach would not make sufficient allowance for certain groups, including, for example, early career researchers, part-time staff and those with periods of maternity, shared parental or other leave.

20. The majority of consultation respondents on this issue suggested that some form of individual staff (or research unit) circumstances measure would be required in the next exercise, particularly if a minimum of one output per person were required. Concerns focused on staff with protected characteristics who could be discriminated against if their circumstances had significantly constrained their ability to work productively throughout the assessment period. This could then have a further negative impact on recruitment behaviour⁹.

21. Analysis of staff selection for REF 2014 indicated differences in selection rates of staff by protected characteristic¹⁰. There is potential for similar negative impact on staff from protected groups, should the staff selection from REF 2014 be moved to output selection without adequate safeguards.

22. Concerns have also been raised about the potential for a reduced pool of outputs available for departments with higher numbers of staff whose circumstances have significantly constrained their ability to work productively throughout the assessment period. This could lead to pressure on other members of staff. It was suggested the impact of this might be felt hardest by smaller research units with a smaller field of outputs to begin with.

Mitigations or policy changes

23. We sought advice from EDAP on the following issues:

- determining the number of outputs required
- provision for small units
- provision for individual circumstances
- provision for unit circumstances.

⁸ See paragraph 32 of 'Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework: Summary of responses' (REF 2017/02), available online at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2017/consultationonthesecondresearchexcellenceframeworksummaryofresponses.html.

⁹ See paragraph 32 of REF 2017/02.

¹⁰ See 'Selection of staff for inclusion in the REF 2014' (HEFCE 2015/17), available online at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2015/201517/.

24. In view of this advice and wider evidence, we will introduce the following mitigations (or similar) into the framework¹¹:

- a. The number of outputs required will be calculated using full-time equivalence (FTE) only, with a minimum of one, and a maximum of five outputs.
- b. Arrangements will be developed to allow institutions to request the exclusion of very small units (fewer than five FTE) from submission in exceptional circumstances¹².
- c. A reduction in the minimum of one output will be available to staff whose exceptional circumstances may have affected the number of outputs produced throughout the census period.
- d. A unit may submit a proportionately reduced number of outputs where it has a high proportion of staff whose circumstances may have affected the number of outputs produced throughout the census period.

Output portability

Proposed policy

25. The Stern review identified problematic disincentives for investment, and negative effects on staff recruitment and retention, associated with the 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.

Equality impacts identified

26. Significant concerns were raised about this proposal in consultation responses, including its unintended consequences for staff mobility (particularly for early career researchers). As well as comments relating to the effect on fixed-term staff, some respondents highlighted wider concerns regarding equality and diversity. Respondents reflected on the characteristics of staff who are more likely to be on fixed-term contracts, or who may need to move for non-career reasons (such as caring responsibilities) or because of discrimination encountered in employment, and highlighted a potential equality impact on age, gender and race.

Mitigations or policy changes

27. Informed by these concerns, the funding bodies agreed that transitional arrangements should be developed for the 2021 exercise and that further views should be sought on the approach to be taken. Institutions and organisations with an interest in research were asked about preferences for either a transitional approach to include a precise but complex hybrid model, or a simpler but less precise approach. In the latter, outputs would be eligible for return by more than one institution¹³.

¹¹ See 'Decisions on staff and outputs' (REF 2017/04), available online at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2017/decisionsonstaffandoutputs.html.

¹² See paragraph 24 of REF 2017/04.

¹³ See 'Initial decisions on REF 2021' (HEFCE Circular letter 33/2017), available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/year/2017/CL_332017/.

28. The majority of consultation respondents supported the simplified model, which was perceived by many as a fairer option for both staff and institutions, which also supported researcher mobility. EDAP also considered that the simplified model best minimised impact on individual researchers. In view of this advice and feedback, the funding bodies have confirmed the simplified model for REF 2021.

29. Concerns raised in the consultation about any future policy change involving non-portability and its impact on staff from protected groups will be recorded and considered in the process to determine policy after REF 2021.

Recruitment of expert panels

30. Data relating to the expert panels in REF 2014 indicates that panel membership was not necessarily representative of the sector as a whole. A 2011 report which analysed panel membership identified that although the proportion of female REF panel members had increased since the RAE 2008 exercise, it was still not representative¹⁴. The report also highlighted that representation from some minority ethnic groups and from disabled people did not reflect the comparative representation in the sector. The report concluded that more could be done for a future REF exercise to reflect the diversity of the academic community in the expert panel roles, and to enhance the collection of data relating to equality and diversity.

31. Therefore, following consultation with the academic community, and with advice from EDAP, a series of measures was set out in the initial decisions publication for improving the collection of data relating to equality and diversity, and improving the representativeness of the panel membership¹⁵.

32. Through these new measures, the aim is:

a. To raise awareness of unconscious bias, and address its potential implications for the selection of the expert panels, through mandatory training sessions for panel chairs. This will help ensure that nomination to panel membership is better informed by information about representativeness of the academic community, and takes better account of equality and diversity in the selection of nominations.

b. That data is collected on the nomination pool and appointed panel membership, the better to understand the representativeness of the pool and monitor whether the changes have improved diversity in panel membership.

Use of metrics in assessing outputs

Proposed policy

33. The call for evidence to Lord Stern's independent review of the REF showed significant support in the sector for the use of metrics in the peer review assessment process. The report consequently recommended that any future exercise should provide

¹⁴ See 'Analysis of Panel Membership' (2011), available at www.ref.ac.uk/2014/pubs/analysisofpanelmembership/.

¹⁵ See 'Initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework 2021' (REF 2017/01), available at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2017/initialdecisionsontheresearchexcellenceframework2021.html.

panels with bibliometric data to inform their judgements, and that panels should be transparent about how this data was used¹⁶.

Equality impacts identified

34. The 'Metric Tide' report highlighted concerns that the use of citation data could disadvantage women, as they are less likely to have their research cited than men in the same careers positions, are less likely to cite themselves, and have more domestic publication portfolios than those of male colleagues, which therefore miss out on the extra citations which international collaborations achieve¹⁷.

35. The report also highlighted the adverse effect on early career researchers and other equalities groups as defined in the Equality Act 2010 who might be negatively impacted by an emphasis on certain indicators¹⁸.

36. This issue is also problematic where it leads to institutions selecting staff (in REF 2014) or outputs (in REF 2021) based on citation data alone.

Mitigations or policy changes

37. To minimise the impact on individuals from protected groups identified above in paragraphs 34-35, the policy for REF 2021 will require HEIs to produce a code of practice outlining their process for taking into account E&D issues when selecting outputs.

38. A further mitigating action for REF 2021 policy will be to allow panels to decide whether they will use citation data to inform their decisions on output assessments, informed by advice received from the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics¹⁹.

39. REF 2021 will also include equality briefings for panels, which will specifically relate to how panels develop their criteria and working methods. An updated equality briefing will also be provided to the panels for the assessment phase of the exercise, and updates will be given as necessary on any relevant developments in equalities and employment legislation.

Broadening the link between research and impact

Proposed policy

40. Lord Stern's review of the REF highlighted the success of the inclusion of impact in the framework, and referred to the 'rich picture' of the contribution that UK research has made to the society and economy.

¹⁶ See the Stern review, 'Building on Success and Learning from Experience' (2016), available online at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-excellence-framework-review>.

¹⁷ See 'The metric tide: Report of the independent review of the role of metrics in research assessment and management', available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2015/metrictide/.

¹⁸ The Equality Act 2010 can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/contents.

¹⁹ See 'Metrics in REF2021: Advice from the UK Forum for Responsible Research Metrics', available at www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/Pages/forum-for-responsible-research-metrics.aspx.

41. To develop a richer picture of the impact of research, the review recommended that options are explored for linking case studies to research activity and a body of work, as well as to a broad range of research outputs. The aim would be to enable institutions to submit examples of impact which encompassed the overall research expertise of an individual or group.

Equality impacts identified

42. Evidence suggests that women and individuals from black and minority ethnic backgrounds may be less likely to be selected, for example to give evidence to Parliament or to appear in the media, based purely on their academic credentials²⁰. The broadening of impact to include bodies of work or general research expertise has the potential to disadvantage these groups through lower representation in impact case studies.

Mitigations or policy changes

43. As a response to the potential equality impact in this area, there will be further discussion in a workshop with the sector, carried out in early 2018, to identify how bodies of work and general expertise can be fairly assessed and credited in the REF.

44. EDAP will continue to provide advice to panels on this area of REF policy during the development of the guidance on submissions and panel criteria during 2018. The panel criteria will be developed through formal consultation with the sector.

Equality and diversity section in the environment template

Proposed policy

45. Findings from a report by CRAC on equality and diversity in REF 2014 environment statements determined that institutions predominantly focused on gender rather than any other protected characteristic, that the 2014 research environment template was not structured systematically enough for institutions to provide a consistent level of E&D activity at UOA level, and that there was some support in the sector for the use of distinctive metrics alongside the narrative approach, to assess the extent to which E&D measures were embedded in the research culture at UOA level²¹.

46. Both the CRAC report and Lord Stern's independent review of the REF recommended the introduction of an institutional-level environment statement to enable more systematic recording of institutional activities, including a more structured template to allow for a more specific focus on issues such as equality and diversity.

Equality impacts identified

47. The use of metrics in the environment template has the potential to narrow the focus towards initiatives or awards with a focus on certain equalities characteristics such

²⁰ 'Women Academics and those from BAME backgrounds engage less with parliament. But why?' by Sarah Foxen, available on the LSE Impact blog at <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/impactofsocialsciences/2017/07/24/women-academics-and-those-from-bame-backgrounds-engage-less-with-parliament-but-why/>.

²¹ See 'Exploring equality and diversity using REF2014 environment statements', available at www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2017/edinref/.

as gender (where there are a greater number of established initiatives such as Athena Scientific Women's Academic Network (Athena SWAN)).

48. There is an opportunity to create a greater positive impact by providing more specific guidance on the range of E&D measures available to HEIs.

Mitigations or policy changes

49. A working group of the Forum for Responsible Metrics has been set up to consider this issue, and will provide advice on developing a menu of indicators already being collected by HEIs that could be included in the guidance to incentivise and improve the recording of equality and diversity measures in the research environment.

50. EDAP will provide advice to the working group in the ongoing development of policy on metrics in the environment statement.

At what stage of the development process was this assessment undertaken?

51. The REF equalities impact assessment is an iterative process, and the assessment will be treated as a working document to be updated at key points in the policy development process where concern about equalities impact is identified. This first iteration of the assessment has taken place at the high-level policy development stage.

52. The further stages of policy development where we will reconsider equality are:

- developing the panel criteria and guidance on submissions
- finalising the panel criteria and guidance on submissions
- adding panel members to support the assessment phase.

53. In recognition of the potential for impact on individuals from protected groups, further consultation will be carried out with the sector as the panel criteria and guidance on submissions are developed. Consultation responses will be invited on draft documents and will inform the final panel criteria and guidance on submissions documents. This will take place during summer 2018.

54. Input will continue to be sought on key policy issues from relevant advisory sources such as EDAP and the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel.

Further information

55. Further information relating to the issues in this assessment can be found in the following locations:

- 'Equality and diversity in the REF: Final report by EDAP' (2015), available at www.ref.ac.uk/2014/equality/edapreport/
- 'REF Codes of Practice for the selection of staff: A report on good practice' (2012), available at www.ref.ac.uk/2014/pubs/refcodesofpracticegoodpracticereport/

Approval

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'David Sweeney', with a large checkmark-like flourish at the end.

Signed by: David Sweeney: Executive Chair Designate, Research England

Date: 27 March 2018