

Open letter to the UK Higher Education sector on equality and diversity in REF 2021

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The funding bodies, and the REF Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) which I chair, are fully committed to supporting and promoting equality and diversity in research careers. We firmly believe that all those involved in REF should exercise a shared responsibility for advancing equality and diversity. To this end, we have put in place a number of measures in REF 2021 to encourage transparency and fairness in the decisions made by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to represent the excellent work of all their staff with significant responsibility for research in their submissions.

A key measure is support for staff with equality-related circumstances. The responses to the consultation on the draft REF 'Guidance on submissions' showed that, while many institutions and other respondents were strongly in favour of the proposals relating to individual staff circumstances, others had a number of serious reservations. These included a concern that the measures put in place to promote inclusion and support equality and diversity might be used by institutions as a mechanism for excluding staff in order to concentrate quality in their submission. Associated with this, was the concern that staff might be put under pressure to disclose sensitive information, which would benefit the institution rather than the individual.

In considering how to respond to such concerns, the REF team and EDAP were guided by the following principles:

- Ensure there is recognition of the effect circumstances can have on individual researcher productivity – and therefore their ability to contribute to the pool of outputs at the same rate as other staff
- Create the right incentives for supporting staff with circumstances (and not introduce negative incentives around recruitment)
- Recognise the potential disparity in the available output pool for units in particular contexts, for example, where there are high proportions of staff with circumstances
- Maintain the integrity of the exercise – both in supporting equality and diversity and ensuring the credibility of the exercise.

The revised guidance therefore requires institutions to establish safe and supporting processes to enable individuals to declare voluntarily their individual circumstances. We believe that it is important that voluntary declaration is used consistently for all types of circumstances to ensure that every individual has the same opportunity to make the decision whether or not to declare their circumstances and have them taken into account by their institution. The revised guidance also requires institutions to recognise the effect of those circumstances on a staff member's ability to contribute to the output pool at the same rate as other staff, and to provide the appropriate support for affected staff. My panel, supported by the funding bodies, believes that this recognition is a core part of a research environment that supports and promotes equality and diversity. Hence, institutions are required to set out in their code of practice how the output selection process takes individual circumstances into account, and how appropriate support is provided to individuals.

The decoupling of staff and outputs in REF 2021 provides increased flexibility to institutions in building the portfolio of outputs for submission, and is considered to be the most effective way to recognise the effect of circumstances on staff productivity. It is the funding bodies' view, again supported by my panel, that institutions will therefore not routinely need to request reductions to the number of outputs required by a submitting unit in order to take account of staff circumstances, particularly given the reduced outputs requirement, from four outputs per person in 2014 to 2.5 outputs per FTE in the current exercise. However, we also recognise that there might be cases where the available output pool has been disproportionately affected by equality-related circumstances. In such cases, the guidance enables units to request a reduction, without penalty, in the total number of outputs required for a submission. It is expected that such requests will usually only be made where there are high proportions of staff in the unit whose circumstances have affected their productivity over the assessment period, including in very small units or, for example, where disciplinary publishing norms make it likely that an individual will have generated a smaller number of outputs across the publication period.

However, we believe it is important to understand both the extent of staff declaring circumstances, and how this has fed into decisions to request unit reductions. Institutions will therefore be required to provide a report, following the submission deadline in November 2020, that shows a breakdown of the circumstances declared, along with a narrative statement reflecting on how decisions were made regarding unit reductions.

Given the requirement that all category A staff with significant responsibility for research should be submitted to REF 2021, the guidance also allows for an individual to be returned without the required minimum of one output without penalty in the assessment, where the nature of the individual's circumstances has had an exceptional effect on their ability to work productively throughout the period. This is intended to minimise any potential negative impact on the careers of particular groups of researchers who have not been able to produce an output in the period due to their equality-related circumstances. This measure was warmly received by researchers and institutions alike in the recent consultation.

Finally, responses to the consultation indicated that there is further opportunity to promote equality and diversity through the environment template, and suggested several ways in which this could be done. A number of these were agreed by my panel and the main panels, and have been added to the revised template. My panel will be reading the people section of the completed environment templates for all submissions and will be providing advice for the panels to consider when making their assessments. Particular attention will be paid to how units address all relevant aspects of support for equality and diversity, and it is expected that there will be synergy between the strategies and structures set out in the environment template and the institution's code of practice. Units will be asked to explain how their approach to construction of their REF submission relates to the process documented in the code of practice. These measures all help to reinforce the funding bodies' commitment to embedding equality and diversity firmly throughout REF 2021.

I very much hope that the package of measures we have put in place will have the desired effect of supporting staff and promoting equality and diversity within your institution.