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# Survey on proposed modifications to the 2021 Research Excellence Framework

Summary of Responses

**REF** 2021 Research  
Excellence  
Framework

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**To**

Heads of universities in Northern Ireland

Heads of higher education institutions in Scotland

Heads of higher education institutions in Wales

Heads of alternative providers in England

Subject associations

Organisations with an interest in commissioning and using academic research including businesses, public sector bodies, charities and other third sector organisations

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**Of interest to those responsible for**

Research, planning

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# Survey on proposed modifications to the 2021 Research Excellence Framework

## Summary of Responses

### Executive summary

#### Purpose

On 24 March 2020 the REF was put on hold until further notice in order to recognise that, in light of COVID-19, institutions are needing to divert staff resource to other critical areas, including for those in clinical and health-related fields. The REF team wished to reassure institutions that such activities could be prioritised without concern for the effect on REF preparations. As part of the development of contingency arrangements for the exercise, the REF team ran a webinar on 24 June, setting out the proposed modifications to the exercise on which we sought views in an online survey. These comprised proposed modifications to the outputs, impact and environment elements of submissions. The survey was open for two weeks, closing on 8 July 2020. This document summarises responses to the survey.

#### Key points

The survey sought views on three questions as follows:

- Whether the proposed modifications for outputs are appropriate
- Whether the proposed modification for impact is appropriate
- Whether the proposed modifications for the environment are appropriate.

Responses to all three questions indicated that a majority considered the proposed modifications to be appropriate, though many of those respondents making substantive further comment requested further guidance on the details of the proposed modifications.

#### Action required

This document is for information.

## Introduction

1. On 24 March 2020 the REF was put on hold until further notice in order to recognise that, in light of COVID-19, institutions are needing to divert staff resource to other critical areas, including for those in clinical and health-related fields. The REF team wished to reassure institutions that such activities could be prioritised without concern for the effect on REF preparations. As part of the development of contingency arrangements for the exercise, the REF team ran a webinar on 24 June, setting out the proposed modifications to the exercise on which we sought views in an online survey. These comprised proposed modifications to the outputs, impact and environment elements of submissions. The survey was open for two weeks, closing on 8 July 2020. This document summarises responses to the survey. Table 1 details overall responses to the survey.

<b>Responses from:</b>	<b>Number</b>
Individuals	36
Businesses	1
Departments or research groups	3
HEIs	110
Representative bodies	2
Subject associations or learned societies	6
Others	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>164</b>

**Table 1: Sources of responses to the survey**

## Summary of responses to the survey

This section summarises, in turn, responses to the three questions posed in the survey.

### Question 1: Outputs

**Question 1:** 'The proposed modifications for outputs are appropriate.'

2. 162 responses were received to question one, with 110 providing substantial additional comment. 87 of those providing additional comment were HEIs.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Higher Education Institution	96	89%	7	6%	5	5%
Business	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Department or research group	2	67%	1	33%	0	0%
Representative body	2	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Subject association / learned society	4	67%	2	33%	0	0%
Individual	24	67%	4	11%	8	22%
Other	4	67%	1	17%	1	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>133</b>	<b>82%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>9%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>9%</b>

**Table 2: Responses to Question 1 by respondent type**

3. The majority of respondents (82 per cent) either agreed or strongly agreed that the proposed modifications for outputs are appropriate, with just under ten per cent of respondents disagreeing and a similar number neither agreeing nor disagreeing. HEIs were more likely than average (89 per cent) to agree with the proposals.

4. Analysis of HEI responses by region shows that Scottish (93 per cent) and Welsh (100 per cent) institutions were more likely than average to agree with the proposed modifications for outputs, and the one response from a Northern Irish institution was also positive. No Welsh institutions disagreed with the proposed modifications.

	England		Scotland		Wales		Northern Ireland	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Strongly agree / agree	76	87%	13	93%	6	100%	1	100%
Neither agree nor disagree	7	8%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly disagree / disagree	4	5%	1	7%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>87</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 3: HEI responses to Question 1 by region**

5. Analysis by TRAC peer group shows that a majority of HEIs agreed that the proposals are appropriate across all TRAC groups. All peer group D (Institutions with a research income less than 5 per cent of total income and total income greater than £150M) and F (specialist arts/music teaching institutions) institutions responding to the survey agreed that the proposed modifications were appropriate, as did 97 per cent of peer group A (institutions with a medical school and research income of 20 per cent or more of total income) institutions. Peer group C (institutions with a research income of between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of total income) and E (those with research income less than 5% of total income and total income less than or equal to £150M) institutions were less likely than average to agree with appropriateness of the proposals, though no group C institutions that responded to the survey disagreed.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
A	28	97%	0	0%	1	3%
B	17	89%	0	0%	2	11%
C	12	71%	5	29%	0	0%
D	14	100%	0	0%	0	0%
E	18	82%	2	9%	2	9%
F	7	100%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>89%</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6%</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5%</b>

**Table 4: HEI responses to Question 1 by TRAC group**

6. Just over 60 per cent (68 respondents) of those who left substantive additional comment expressed their welcome for the proposed measures, particularly noting the pragmatism, flexibility, appropriateness and proportionality of the proposals. Commenters specifically welcomed that the measures sought to retain robust assessment and minimise additional burden, and also noted that the proposals would help both institutions and individual researchers. A small number noted that the proposals were particularly pertinent in face of the difficulties for practice research due to COVID-19, though others felt that the proposed measures would not overcome all such difficulties.

7. Many respondents (predominantly HEIs) requested additional clarification and guidance in their comments. 24 per cent of commenters requested further guidance on the proposed modification for delayed outputs, in particular on the criteria such outputs must meet and on how the proposal would specifically apply to practice-based research outputs. A quarter of commenters requested further guidance on the proposed additional statement for affected outputs, particularly in terms of when this should be used and what information it should contain. 24 per cent of commenters called for further clarity on the proposal to include COVID-19 circumstances within the process for removing the minimum of one output requirement. These comments often called for further guidance on determining whether a staff member was eligible for the reduction to the minimum of one, and on whether the proposal also applied to unit reductions requests. A smaller number of commenters (10 per cent) requested further guidance on the Open Access proposal, particularly to seek clarity on audit consequences.

8. Just over a fifth of commenters (22 per cent) requested further guidance and clarity on audit more generally and particularly on what would constitute verifiable evidence for use of each of the proposed mitigations. 19 per cent of commenters called for further information on how the sub-panels will use information provided to them as a result of the mitigations; and particularly how panels will use any additional statements provided for COVID-19 affected outputs. Commenters registered some concern over whether such statements would affect the scoring of outputs and how the panels would use such information to inform their assessment. Just under ten per cent of commenters requested that all further guidance be issued as soon as possible to allow institutions to liaise with CRIS suppliers. A small number of commenters also requested worked examples of the statements for affected outputs, further guidance on the submission of physical outputs, and further guidance on amending Codes of practice.

9. A fifth of commenters noted that the proposed modifications would create additional burden for institutions. In particular, commenters noted that the requirement for verifiable evidence would create additional burden. There was also concern from an equality and diversity perspective that women, those with caring responsibilities and those with other protected characteristics have been more affected by COVID-19 and would therefore be more likely to require the proposed modifications. This was linked to concern around increased burden and perceived increased risk in using such modifications. A small number felt that the additional burden incurred was compounded by the risk of sub-panels not accepting a mitigation; e.g. a panel not agreeing that an output was delayed by COVID-19 or that a minimum of one reduction should not be applied.

10. Just under ten per cent of commenters felt that the proposed modifications were not appropriate. Such respondents often cited the particular difficulties faced by practice research disciplines as the reason for this. These commenters also made suggestions for alternative modifications, including further delay to the submission deadline, reductions

to the number of outputs required by submitting units, alteration to the census date, and having an additional round of advance equality-related circumstances requests ahead of the revised submission deadline.

11. Smaller numbers of respondents also raised the following in their comments:
  - a. There were six queries (all from HEIs) around how the proposed modifications would affect future research assessment exercises, in particular the assessment period for outputs given the proposals for accommodating delayed outputs in REF 2021.
  - b. Requests for further modifications for delayed outputs, including the ability to submit reserve outputs for these, and for the modification to be extended to the underpinning research for impact case studies.
  - c. Requests for further modifications to staff circumstances, including allowing COVID-19 alone to be a sufficient eligible circumstance for a REF6a request, and extending modifications to REF6b requests.
  - d. Concern that 100 words will be insufficient for the additional statement for COVID-19 affected outputs.

## Question 2: Impact

**Question 1:** 'The additional statement proposed for affected impact case studies is appropriate.'

### Summary of responses for question two: 'The additional statement proposed for affected impact case studies is appropriate'

12. 157 responses were received to question two, with 117 respondents providing substantive additional comment. 95 of those providing additional comment were HEIs.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Higher Education Institution	71	65%	15	14%	24	22%
Business	0	0%	0	0%	1	100%
Department or research group	1	33%	1	33%	1	33%
Representative body	1	50%	1	50%	0	0%
Subject association / learned society	3	60%	2	40%	0	0%
Individual	17	57%	9	30%	4	13%
Other	4	67%	1	17%	1	17%
<b>Total</b>	<b>97</b>	<b>62%</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>18%</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>20%</b>

**Table 5: Responses to Question 2 by respondent type**



13. Overall, responses to question two were largely positive, with 62 per cent of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing that the proposed additional statement for impact case studies is appropriate. Similar numbers of respondents either disagreed or neither agreed, or disagreed with the proposal. HEIs were slightly more likely than average to agree that the proposed additional statement for impact case studies is appropriate, with just under two thirds either agreeing or strongly agreeing with the proposal. HEIs were also slightly more likely than average to disagree with the proposal.

14. There was some variation in HEI responses by UK region. English HEIs were less likely than average (59 per cent) to agree that the proposed additional statement for impact case studies is appropriate, and more likely to disagree (24 per cent). In contrast, Scottish (86 per cent) and Welsh (83 per cent) HEIs were more likely to agree that the proposed additional statement is appropriate. Only 14 per cent of Scottish HEIs and 17 per cent of Welsh HEIs disagreed that the additional statement is appropriate. Both Northern Irish institutions that responded to the survey agreed that the proposed additional statement is appropriate.

	England		Scotland		Wales		Northern Ireland	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Strongly agree / agree	52	59%	12	86%	5	83%	2	100%
Neither agree nor disagree	15	17%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Strongly disagree / disagree	21	24%	2	14%	1	17%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 6: HEI responses to Question 2 by region**

15. Analysis of HEI responses by TRAC groups also show some variation. In particular, HEIs in TRAC peer group F (specialist arts/music teaching institutions) were less likely to agree that the proposed additional statement is appropriate, and were equally likely to disagree. By contrast, HEIs in peer group B (those with research income of 15 per cent or more of their total income) and peer group E (those with research income less than 5 per cent of total income and total income less than or equal to £150M) were more likely than average to agree that the additional statement is appropriate.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
A	18	60%	7	23%	5	17%
B	15	75%	0	0%	5	25%
C	10	59%	2	12%	5	29%
D	9	64%	2	14%	3	21%
E	16	73%	3	14%	3	14%
F	3	43%	1	14%	3	43%
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>65%</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>14%</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>22%</b>

**Table 7: HEI responses to Question 2 by TRAC group**

16. Comments provided by respondents frequently requested further information and guidance on the purpose, content and use of the additional statement for impact case studies. Often such comments were made by those who welcomed the proposal for an additional statement overall. 27 per cent of commenters expressed general welcome for the proposal, particularly noting their welcome of the extension to the impact assessment period and the opportunity to detail the effects of COVID-19 on individual case studies.

17. The most frequently made comment, cited by 45 per cent of commenters, was a call for further clarity on how the sub-panels will use the additional statement. In particular, respondents were unsure whether the statement would form part of the panels' assessment and, if it did inform assessment, how this would work. Just over 90 per cent of such comments were made by HEIs. This request for clarity was more often made by those who agreed with the proposed statement (45 per cent of such comments) than by those who disagreed (32 per cent).

18. Just over a third of commenters (again, just over 90 per cent of which were HEIs) requested further guidance on what to include in additional statements for impact case studies and on when making such statements would be appropriate. Again, this statement more often came from those who agreed with the proposal for an additional statement (56 per cent of such comments) than from those who disagreed (just under 20 per cent of such comments). Commenters wanted further guidance on when to use the additional statement and felt that guidance would discourage game-playing and over-use of the statement. Commenters were unsure whether the statement should detail effects on impact activity, evidence collection or both, and on whether personal circumstances should be included in statements.

19. The comments made by respondents also called for clarity in other areas. Again, such comments were predominantly made by HEIs and tended to be raised more by those in support of the additional statement than by those who disagreed that it is appropriate.

- a. 19 per cent of commenters requested further clarity on what would constitute verifiable evidence of claims made within additional statements for impact case studies. Some respondents were unsure whether evidence needed to be included in the statement or would be submitted through audit, while others requested examples

of acceptable evidence. Some also noted that collecting verifiable evidence would add burden, particularly if the statements are not assessed.

- b. 12 per cent of commenters called for clarity on the 'optionality' of the universal extension to the impact assessment period. The reasons for this were mixed, with some respondents being unclear as to whether the extension was mandatory, optional or available only to case studies affected by COVID-19; others understood the principle of the extension but wanted stronger wording issued; and others still raised concerns about whether the use of the universal extension would be assessed by panels.
  - c. 11 per cent of commenters requested further clarity on the definition of substantial disruption due to COVID-19. In particular, respondents expressed some concern that this would necessarily be a subjective definition that would encourage HEIs and researchers to seek to use the statement for all case studies.
  - d. A small number of commenters requested clarity on implications of the additional statement for the submission system, in order to facilitate work with CRIS suppliers.
20. 18 per cent of commenters (80 per cent of which were HEIs) felt that the proposed additional statement would add further burden, particularly on HEIs. Often these respondents argued that the statement constituted additional burden because the panels will not assess potential impact and will not assess the additional statement. Just over 80 per cent of such comments were made by those who disagreed with the proposal, though a small number of respondents who agreed also made this point.
21. 13 per cent of commenters, all HEIs, suggested that 100 words is too short for the additional statement, though most of these respondents agreed with the proposal overall. Some respondents felt that if the statement is intended only for significantly affected case studies, 100 words would not allow sufficient detail.
22. Small numbers of respondents also noted the following points:
- a. That the proposed additional statement does not provide mitigation for activity that will no longer take place during the impact assessment period, or for instances where collecting corroborating evidence by the deadline is now difficult.
  - b. Delayed underpinning research should be subject to the same mitigation as for delayed outputs.
  - c. The period between the end of the revised assessment period (31 December 2020) and the revised submission deadline (31 March 2020) is shorter than under the original schedule, resulting in insufficient time to write up impact case studies.

### Question 3: Environment

**Question 1:** 'The proposed modifications for the environment are appropriate.'

23. 149 responses were received to question three, with 108 respondents providing substantive additional comment.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Higher Education Institution	72	68%	18	16%	17	16%
Business	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Department or research group	3	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Representative body	2	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Subject association / learned society	2	40%	3	60%	0	0%
Individual	16	59%	7	26%	4	15%
Other	4	80%	1	20%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>67%</b>	<b>28</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>14%</b>

**Table 8: Responses to Question 3**

24. The overall responses were largely supportive of the proposed modifications for the environment, with just over two thirds of respondents in agreement. Just under one fifth of respondents neither agreed nor disagreed with the proposed modifications, and 14 per cent disagreed. HEIs were slightly more likely than average to agree that the proposed modifications were appropriate, but were also slightly more likely than average to disagree. Scottish HEIs were more likely than average to agree that the proposed modifications are appropriate, while Welsh institutions were more likely to neither agree nor disagree. Subject associations were more likely to neither agree nor disagree with the proposed modifications than any other response option and compared to any other type of respondent.

	England		Scotland		Wales		Northern Ireland	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Strongly agree / agree	56	66%	11	79%	4	67%	1	100%
Neither agree nor disagree	15	18%	0	0%	2	33%	0	0%
Strongly disagree / disagree	14	16%	3	21%	0	0%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>85</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>100%</b>

**Table 9: HEI responses to Question 3 by region**

25. Analysis by TRAC peer group shows that institutions in peer group A (institutions with a medical school and research income of 20 per cent or more of total income) and C (institutions with a research income of between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of total income) were less likely than average to agree with the proposed modifications. Peer group C institutions were instead more likely to disagree, while peer group A institutions were more likely to neither agree nor disagree. Peer Group B (institutions with research income of 15 per cent or more of total income) and E (institutions with a research income less than 5 per cent of total income and total income less than or equal to £150 million) institutions were most likely to agree with the proposed modifications. Peer Group B institutions were much less likely to disagree with the proposals than average.

	Strongly agree / agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree/strongly disagree	
	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
A	19	63%	7	23%	4	13%
B	14	78%	3	17%	1	6%
C	8	50%	2	13%	6	38%
D	10	71%	2	14%	2	14%
E	16	76%	1	5%	4	19%
F	5	71%	2	29%	0	0%
<b>Total</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>68%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16%</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>16%</b>

**Table 10: HEI responses to Question 3 by TRAC group**

26. While there was overall support for the modifications proposed, the additional comments made by respondents contained a range of viewpoints.
27. Approximately half of those who made additional comment requested further guidance on the proposed modifications. Such comments were made by both those who overall agreed and those who overall disagreed with the proposed modifications and included requests for further information on the content of additional statements, what constitutes verifiable evidence, how UOA-specific effects should be recorded, and on the distinction between the general and specific effects of COVID-19 experienced by institutions. Roughly a third of those commenting particularly requested additional detail on how the panels would use information provided in the institutional-level environment additional statement. While around a third of those commenting noted explicitly that they would welcome guidance on the forward-looking elements of submissions, many of these also requested further guidance on this. A small number, however, considered that any attempt to set out future plans would not be meaningful and submissions and/or assessment should be focus only on the retrospective.
28. Just under a fifth of those making additional comment suggested that an additional statement should be allowed at the unit level. Such comments came both from those who overall agreed and those who overall disagreed with the proposed modifications. Respondents making this point noted that units within an HEI have been affected by COVID-19 to differing degrees, which may not be adequately captured in an institutional-level statement.
29. A small number of respondents requested details of how submissions would be verified, and requested clarity on how any additional element would be submitted, noting that this would have an impact on CRIS suppliers.
30. 45 respondents specifically highlighted their welcome for the opportunity to provide an additional statement at the institutional level, noting that this will help in acknowledging the negative impacts that had been experienced due to COVID-19 and allow submitting institutions to provide relevant context. A third of these respondents specifically noted that they considered the proposals to be pragmatic and proportional given the relatively short portion of the assessment period affected by COVID-19.
31. Of respondents who disagreed that the proposed modifications to the environment are appropriate, just over two thirds cited the view that an additional statement within the institutional-level environment statement would create burden. A small number of those in agreement with an additional statement also noted that it would add burden. A third of respondents who disagreed with the proposals also noted that the purpose and potential benefits of the proposed modifications were unclear. A small number of respondents suggested that the institutional-level environment statement should no longer be in the exercise.



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