

REF2021 Survey: Proposed modifications to REF2021

Introduction

The purpose of this short survey is to gather views on proposed modifications to the REF 2021 exercise. Responses are invited from any organisation, group or individual with an interest in the conduct, quality, funding or use of research. The REF webinar held on 24 June outlined the proposed modifications; information about this webinar, and a brief overview of the proposals, can be found here: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/events/consultation-webinar-on-proposed-modifications-to-the-2021-research-excellence-framework/>.

The deadline for responses to the survey is noon, 8 July 2020.

The REF team will copy responses to the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, Research England and the Scottish Funding Council.

We will publish a summary of responses. We may publish individual responses to the survey in the summary. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the relevant Freedom of Information Acts across the UK. The Acts give a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case the four UK funding bodies. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means that responses are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. For further information about the Acts see the Information Commissioner's Office website, www.ico.gov.uk or, in Scotland, the website of the Scottish Information Commissioner www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/

Any personal data will be processed according to the requirements of the Data Protection Act 2018, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and UK Research and Innovation's Privacy notice. If you provide personal data about other people in your response you should ensure that you have a lawful basis for doing so.

For further information relating to UK Research and Innovation's Privacy notice, please visit <https://www.ukri.org/privacy-notice/>

Respondent details

Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of: *

If you are providing the official response of your institution, organisation or group, please indicate that you are responding on behalf of that institution, organisation or group. If you are responding in a personal capacity, please indicate that you are responding “As an individual.”

- As an individual
- Business
- Charity
- Department or research group
- Higher Education Institution
- Public sector organisation
- Representative body
- Subject association or learned society
- Other (please specify):

Please provide the name of your organisation. *

If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

Outputs

Q1: Taken as a whole, the proposed modifications for outputs are appropriate.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Please provide any comments on your answer, including where applicable any considerations in relation to interdisciplinary research and/or equality and diversity (500 words):

We are satisfied with the retention of the original output deadline alongside the inclusion of a mitigation process for those outputs which would have appeared prior to the deadline but have been delayed due to Covid.

We are, however, unconvinced by the rationale and process for the removing of the minimum of one output requirement, and the way this is presented, in particular the qualification that this should only apply 'when a staff member has been unable to produce to produce an eligible output before Covid-19 due to equality related circumstances'.

In imposing this additional qualification, the proposed revision introduces a new retroactive REF deadline for the production of a 'first output' within the research cycle by any submitted staff who have no equality related circumstances. There was no suggestion in the original REF guidelines that any outputs were required to have been produced prior to the final deadline, yet this is what the new procedure has effectively introduced.

There will likely be individual members of a UoA with significant responsibility for research who only ever intended to produce one output for submission to the exercise to appear in 2020. In disciplines such as History major research projects are often focussed on the production of a single, stand-alone monograph. Authors might be prevented from completing this output due to Covid-19: for example, the inability to finalise references as a result of the closure of archives and libraries could prevent their book or article manuscripts being advanced from copy-editing to proof stage and publication.

Members of staff appointed during the cycle, who would not necessarily have ECR status, are particularly likely to be affected in this way.

We would therefore prefer a much simpler wording to be adopted:

A reduction of 1 output can be applied for a member of staff who has no eligible output due to COVID-19.

The operation of the mitigations around delayed output publications between 1 January and 31 March also require elaboration. Will units who have submitted an output that appeared after 31 Dec 2020 be able to nominate a reserve output in case the supporting evidence that this was due to Covid related delays not be accepted?

Will the sub-panellists themselves be required to adjudicate whether an output that appeared after 31 Jan 2020 may be included in the submission? This would seem desirable, yet the workload on sub-panellists is such under the new timetable that creating this additional burden should only be undertaken if guarantees of support are provided to them. Currently there is no requirement on the submitting institutions to which sub-panellists are attached to provide them with a necessary level of support such as remission from teaching. With the evaluation process now spanning not just two semesters, but two academic years, it is vital that the same HEIs and Funding Councils that have made much of their desire to deliver the REF in a timely fashion, commit to providing sub-panellists with the support necessary to deliver a rigorous peer review.

Impact (REF 3)

Q2. The additional statement proposed for affected impact case studies is appropriate.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Please provide any comments on your response (300 words):

The extension of the date for the evidence of impact is welcome as is the recognition that this will not resolve all the issues arising from the delays or cancellations of impact related activities. Until there is detail on the proposed content of the contextual statements and the ways that this is to be used by panellists, it is not possible to provide further opinion upon this.

Environment (REF4a/b/c, REF5a/b)

Q3. The proposed modifications for the environment are appropriate.

- Strongly disagree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Agree
- Strongly agree

Please provide any comments on your response (300 words):

We agree that there is no reason to extend the date for the submission of the Environment statements beyond the overall deadline of 31 March. The recognition that the Covid episode has transformed the external environment in which research will be pursued is sensible, but given the continuing uncertainties surrounding the structures and finances of the entire Higher Education sector, it is difficult to envisage how the sub-panellists will be able to interrogate statements relating to future strategy in a rigorous manner. The REF should remain an exercise that is primarily focussed on recognising demonstrated excellence wherever it is found over the duration of the assessment period.