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Research Excellence Framework 2021

Guidance to panels



Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland
Higher Education Funding Council for Wales
Research England
Scottish Funding Council

Research Excellence Framework: Guidance to panels

Introduction

1. This document provides guidance for Main Panels A-D to develop, with input from their sub-panels, criteria and working methods for the assessment of higher education research in the 2021 Research Excellence Framework (REF).
2. The UK higher education funding bodies intend to give higher education institutions (HEIs) the fullest possible account of the assessment framework, criteria, data requirements and processes involved in the REF, to enable them to prepare submissions and to ensure transparency and confidence in the REF process. They will publish this information in the following documents:
 3. **'Guidance on submissions'**, to be published in draft in July 2018, with certain aspects for consultation. It will be published in final form in early 2019. This document, produced by the REF team, will set out:
 - a. The overall framework for assessment and administrative arrangements for REF 2021.
 - b. The generic criteria and standard set of data and information that will be required from institutions in making their submissions, and the standard definitions that apply.
 - c. Procedural guidance to institutions on preparing their submissions.
 4. The **'Panel criteria and working methods'** (hereafter, 'Panel criteria'), to be published in draft for consultation in July 2018 and in final form in early 2019. Responding to feedback for increased consistency in the criteria, and following discussion with the main panels, this document will combine in one statement the generic criteria that will apply across all main panels, and will set out where relevant additional criteria from each main panel have been identified, with input from their sub-panels. This document, produced by the main panels, will:
 - a. Describe in more detail the assessment criteria the main panels and their groups of sub-panels will apply when assessing submissions.
 - b. Provide further guidance to institutions on what kinds of evidence and indicators should be included in the narrative elements of their submissions (in particular, the impact and environment elements).
 - c. Describe how the main panels will in practice fulfil their role in overseeing the assessment process.

- d. Describe how the sub-panels will in practice carry out the assessment.

Key points

6. The four main panels are invited to develop the panel criteria and working methods statement, that:
 - a. Sets out – within the overall framework for assessment that is described in the ‘Guidance on submissions’ document – the criteria and working methods that the main panels and their groups of sub-panels will apply in assessing submissions to REF 2021, and any criteria specific to each main panel and its group of sub-panels.
 - b. Describes criteria and methods for assessing submissions from institutions that will be made according to the data requirements and definitions defined in ‘Guidance on submissions’. The panel criteria must take account of all the information required in submissions. The main panels should provide further guidance on the types of information required within the textual parts of submissions, but should not request additional types of information that do not fit within the standard format for submissions.
 - c. Provides a single, consistent set of criteria that will be applied by the sub-panels when undertaking the assessment, with variations in the criteria of any of its sub-panels only where these are justified by differences in the nature of the discipline. The funding bodies expect the variation in criteria between the group of sub-panels within each main panel to be the minimum that is necessary to reflect differences between research in their disciplines. The main panel should not agree to differences in criteria on the basis of sub-panel preferences, where they are not justified on this basis. They expect the variation in criteria between the main panels to reflect meaningful difference between the application of the criteria for each main panel, and that common criteria will be applied where this is not the case.
 - d. Provides a common approach to the working methods of the sub-panels.
 - e. Addresses each of the questions set out in this document.
7. Each main panel should develop the criteria and working methods with detailed input from its group of sub-panels.
8. To increase appropriate consistency in the criteria, and avoid variations in language to express the same ideas, the ‘Panel criteria’ will be presented as one statement with main panel

variations indicated in each section, as applicable. As a starting position, the REF team have developed draft combined criteria, drawing on the four main panel criteria statements for REF 2014, for key aspects where minimal changes are expected to the criteria for REF 2021. The combined criteria predominantly reflects synthesis of the four previous statements; in some cases, it incorporates points from an individual main panel statement that we consider will apply across all main panels. The combined criteria has been developed with advice from the main panel chairs and secretariat.

9. Main panels are requested to review the draft combined criteria provided by the REF team, considering the relevance and application to their area of activity, and to identify any areas of inaccuracy or inconsistency in approach. Main panels are also requested to review the key areas of variation between the main panels in the REF 2014 panel criteria, to assess whether the criteria are sufficiently close to that of other main panels that they can be further aligned, or whether they need to be removed, replaced or amended. Where required, as indicated in the questions below, main panels are to propose new criteria. To support the development of the common and main panel-specific criteria, the REF team will:

- a. Meet with the main panel chairs and main panel advisers at the start and end of the drafting process, to identify any issues of disparity and discuss where consistency across main panels is feasible and desirable.
- b. Edit the statement to ensure consistency of structure, style and terminology in any aspects of main panel variation.

10. The REF team and UK funding bodies will review the draft and final 'Panel criteria' prior to publication to ensure their adherence to the guidance set out in this document, and to the overall framework for assessment set out in 'Guidance on submissions'.

11. Once the final 'Panel criteria' has been published (in early 2019), main or sub-panels will not be permitted to depart from them other than in exceptional circumstances that cannot be accommodated within the published framework. In such cases, the reason and details of the change will be published as an amendment.

Generic criteria and procedures

12. This document provides guidance to the main panels for developing the criteria and working methods, within the overall assessment framework set out in 'Guidance on submissions'. Statements about the generic criteria – including the generic assessment criteria and level definitions for each of the three sub-profiles, the weighting of each element (outputs, impact and environment) and the method for combining sub-profiles to form the overall quality profiles – will be

included in the draft 'Guidance on submissions' and will be cross-referenced in the 'Panel criteria' as relevant.

13. The REF team will also set out the generic procedures for panels to follow in the 'Panel criteria'. This will include:

- determining panel competence to do business
- dealing with absences of the chair
- procedures for appointing further sub-panel members and assessors
- managing conflicts of interest
- safeguarding the confidentiality of information.

14. We will also provide a briefing on equality and diversity issues for main and sub-panels in carrying out REF 2021.

Timetable for developing the 'Panel criteria'

March - June 2018	Initial rounds of panel meetings
July 2018	Publication of draft 'Panel criteria' for consultation
July - early October 2018	Consultation period
November - December 2018	Final round of panel meetings in criteria phase
Early 2019	Publication of final 'Panel criteria and working methods'

Content of panel criteria and working methods

15. In developing the criteria, each main panel should review the combined and panel specific statements for each section of the guidance, and address the questions below. For each section the main panel should ensure the combined and panel specific criteria together describe the common approach across its group of sub-panels, and state any differences between the sub-panels where agreed by the main panel on the basis that they are justified by differences in the nature of the disciplines concerned. The funding bodies do not expect sub-panel variation on aspects of the criteria that were consistent in 2014, unless exceptional circumstances apply and can be evidenced.

16. The funding bodies expect the 'Panel criteria' to follow the structure set out below, and do not expect there to be specific sections that describe the criteria and methods of each sub-panel in turn.

17. The REF team have provided draft combined criteria drawing on the four main panel criteria statements for REF 2014. The combined criteria predominantly reflects synthesis of the REF 2014 four main panel criteria statements; in some cases, it incorporates points from an individual main panel statement that we consider will apply across all main panels. We have additionally identified the significant variations or additional elements in the main panels' approaches in 2014. Variations to the combined criteria have been provided with the generic criteria in a separate text box per panel.

18. Main panels are requested to review the draft combined criteria, considering the relevance and application to their area of activity, and to identify any areas of inaccuracy or inconsistency in approach. Main panels are also requested to review the key areas of variation between the main panels in the REF 2014 panel criteria, to assess whether the criteria are sufficiently close to that of other main panels that they can be further aligned, or whether they need to be removed, replaced or amended. Where required, as indicated in the questions below, main panels are to propose new criteria.

Section 1: Submissions and UOAs

Q1. Describe the areas of research that fall within each of the units of assessment (UOAs) covered by the main panel, the boundaries of each UOA, which other UOAs are on the boundaries, and in which other UOAs research on these boundaries may be submitted. Panels should:

- reference the REF 2014 UOA descriptors
- note the general support received through consultation for maintaining consistency in the process where possible
- consider revisions particularly where there have been any changes to the UOA structure, or to address any identified issues of coverage or clarity with the previous descriptor.

Q2. Review the draft combined criteria and main panel variation for the text relating to 'Interdisciplinary research and work on the boundaries between UOAs' that describes the general arrangements the sub-panels will follow to assess submissions which span the boundaries between two or more UOAs. Panels should:

- identify any amendments to the draft combined criteria
- where applicable, review the main panel variation and consider any alignment, amendment or removal.

Q3. Describe the main panel's expectations about the submission of pedagogical research for its group of sub-panels.

Q4. 'Guidance on submissions' sets out the generic criteria and procedures for permitting multiple submissions (two or more submissions from an HEI in a single UOA). Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria for multiple submissions, and identify any amendments
- given the nature of the disciplines covered by the main panel, state which of the sub-panels expect to receive multiple submissions, and describe the anticipated characteristics of multiple submissions in these UOAs.

Section 2: Outputs

Q5. Describe in more detail the generic criteria of ‘rigour, originality and significance’ and the generic level definitions, as they will be applied by the group of sub-panels under each main panel in assessing outputs and developing the outputs sub-profile. Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria and identify any amendments
- review the main panel variation and consider whether the interpretations of the criteria may be aligned.

Q6. For REF 2021 we will provide a glossary for the list of output types, which can be cross-referenced in the ‘Panel criteria’ to help the panels describe the types of output that may be listed. Review the combined draft criteria for output types that aims to do this and to describe how the main panel will ensure that all types of eligible outputs will be assessed on an equal basis. Panels should identify any necessary amendments.

Q7. Review the draft combined criteria for outputs with significant material in common, and identify any necessary amendments.

Q8. Review the draft combined criteria on co-authored outputs and the main panel variation in 2014, and identify any necessary changes to explain the main panel’s arrangements for taking account of an individual author’s contribution to an output, including (if so):

- how the sub-panels will take account of this in assessing outputs
- what specific information is required about the author’s contribution (maximum 100 words) and in what circumstances this information is required.

Q9. ‘Guidance on submissions’ sets out a generic process for institutions to request that an output of extended scale and scope should be ‘double-weighted’ by the sub-panel (that is, it should count as two outputs rather than one, regardless of its quality rating), and that a reserve output may be submitted where a double-weighting request is made. Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria for double-weighted outputs and identify any necessary amendments
- review the main panel’s expectations from 2014 and consider any amendments, including:
 - the criteria the group of sub-panels will apply in deciding whether to double-weight an output of extended scale and scope

- whether the main panel requires a supporting statement to justify the claim (max 100 words)
- where requiring a statement, whether additional guidance should be given on the kind of information an institution should provide in its submission when making such requests
- given the nature of the disciplines covered by the main panel, any expectations about how numerous or rare double-weighted outputs are expected to be in these UOAs.

Q10. Review the draft combined criteria and main panel variation in 2014 for additional information, and identify any necessary amendments.

Q11. The REF team will provide citation data in a standard form to those sub-panels that wish to make use of such data as additional information about the academic significance of individual outputs. (The REF team will also provide guidance to these panels about the use of citation data.) Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria that explain how the sub-panels will interpret the data and make use of it to inform judgements, and how they will ensure assessment on an equal footing – the main and sub-panels should reference the equality briefing for panels when reviewing this section
- identify any necessary changes to the draft combined criteria
- state which sub-panels will make use of citation data in the assessment.

Section 3: Impact

Q12. In REF 2014 the panels provided a range of guidance on impact to give confidence to the sector for what was a new element of the assessment. Feedback on the guidance from the 2014 exercise has called for greater consistency and further clarity in some aspects (while not being overly prescriptive), and the recommendations of the Stern review sought to encourage greater recognition of the diverse pathways to impact. Review the draft combined criteria that sets out an introduction to the assessment of impact, aiming to address some of these points. Panels should:

- identify any amendments to the draft text
- consider any additional points for inclusion.

Q13. The REF consultation revealed a desire for more detailed guidance on 'reach and significance', in particular the relationship between the two criteria. Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria for reach and significance, and identify any necessary amendments
- consider any additional points to describe how 'reach and significance' will be applied to assess impact case studies

- review the main panel's interpretation of the criteria from 2014, and consider whether these may be aligned.

Q14. 'Guidance on submissions' sets out the generic requirements for institutions submitting case studies that meet the definition of 'continued case studies'. Describe how the sub-panels will assess continued case studies. In particular, whether any additional information will be required for continued case studies and how this information will be used by the sub-panels.

Q15. Review the draft combined criteria and main panel variation in 2014 relating to guidance on the range of impacts. The draft criteria combines the examples of impact and evidence provided by the four main panels in 2014. Panels should:

- identify any amendments in the draft combined criteria
- review the 2014 main panel variation and consider whether there are key principles applicable across the main panels that could be drawn out
- consider the value and appropriate level of detail in including examples of impact, and the best way of organising these (e.g. by impact area, such as health, economy, culture; by impact type, such as awareness/understanding, policy, practice/behaviour; by another means)
- identify any amendments or additions to the examples of impact set out
- describe how impacts on teaching within the submitting unit's own institution may be demonstrated against the criteria for impact.

Q16. Review the combined and main panel variation from 2014 providing guidance on evidence of impact, and identify any amendments or additions, including:

- how the panel will use the evidence provided to the REF team when requested through audit
- the difference between evidence of dissemination and evidence of impact
- how the sub-panels will assess testimonials
- which types of evidence, if any, will be preferred by the sub-panels
- consider the value and appropriate level of detail in including examples of indicators, and identify any amendments or additions.

Q17. Describe how the sub-panels will make judgements that the body of research underpinning a case study as a whole meets the quality threshold. Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria and identify any amendments
- review the main panel variation in 2014, and consider whether there is opportunity to further align, or whether amendment or removal is required
- describe how the sub-panels will make judgements in relation to bodies of research underpinning impact, including what information (in addition to the outputs) they will accept as an illustration of quality.

Q18. Review the draft combined criteria on writing impact case studies and identify any amendments or additions.

Section 4: Environment

Q19. Review the draft combined criteria and main panel variation on the interpretation of the environment criteria, and identify any amendments.

Q20. Describe how the sub-panels will form the environment sub-profiles on the basis of the submitted information, including how much relative importance the sub-panels will attach to each component within the environment template (as structured in 'Guidance on submissions').

Q21. Each submission will include information about the research environment, provided in a standard template (REF5). Provide guidance about what kinds of evidence and indicators should be submitted within the environment template. Panels should:

- review the draft combined criteria that provide an introduction to this sub-section
- include any specific types of information requested or examples of types of evidence for each section of the template
- describe what information should be submitted about the unit's approach to supporting and enabling impact in the period
- contribute to the development of generic criteria for the institutional-level section of the environment template (including the coverage and level of detail), and describe how the sub-panels will take this into account in their assessment of the environment.

Q22. Each submission will include data on doctoral degrees awarded and research income, reported to panels in a standard form (as set out in the 'Guidance on submissions'). Review the draft combined criteria that describe how the sub-panels will use the standard data analysis to inform judgements about the research environment, and identify any amendments.

Q23. As set out in 'Guidance on submissions', institutions should seek to draw on quantitative indicators where possible to evidence the environment statement. Panels should:

- describe how institutions should use quantitative indicators
- request any more detailed or additional data for specific UOAs, where:
 - these adhere to the principles developed by the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics
 - the main panel supports the request on the basis of the nature of the discipline(s) concerned¹

¹ The REF director will agree to any such requests only where the data are clearly defined and potentially auditable, and the value of the data in informing the assessment is judged to outweigh the burden on institutions in providing it.

- the data are clearly specified and defined to enable consistency in reporting
- its use to inform the assessment, including its relative importance in informing judgements, is explained
- describe how the sub-panels will take these into account in the assessment.

Section 5: Panel procedures

Q24. Review the draft guidance on panel procedures, and identify any necessary amendments.

Section 6: Panel working methods

Q25. The main panel working methods should describe how the main panels will provide oversight of the sub-panel procedures, and how they will work with their sub-panels to ensure adherence to the assessment criteria and consistency in the application of assessment standards. Review the draft guidance on main panel working methods and identify any necessary amendments.

Q26. The sub-panel working methods should describe how the sub-panels will ensure that submissions are assessed with appropriate expertise, how they will ensure consistency of assessment, and their approach to ensuring submissions are examined in sufficient detail to form robust judgements. Review the draft guidance on sub-panel working methods and identify any necessary amendments.

Q27. Describe any approaches the sub-panels will take to apply more granularity in scoring aspects of submissions.