

REF 2021

Research
Excellence
Framework

Taking part in REF 2021

A guide for impact assessors

August 2020



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The REF results inform strategic decisions

What is the REF?

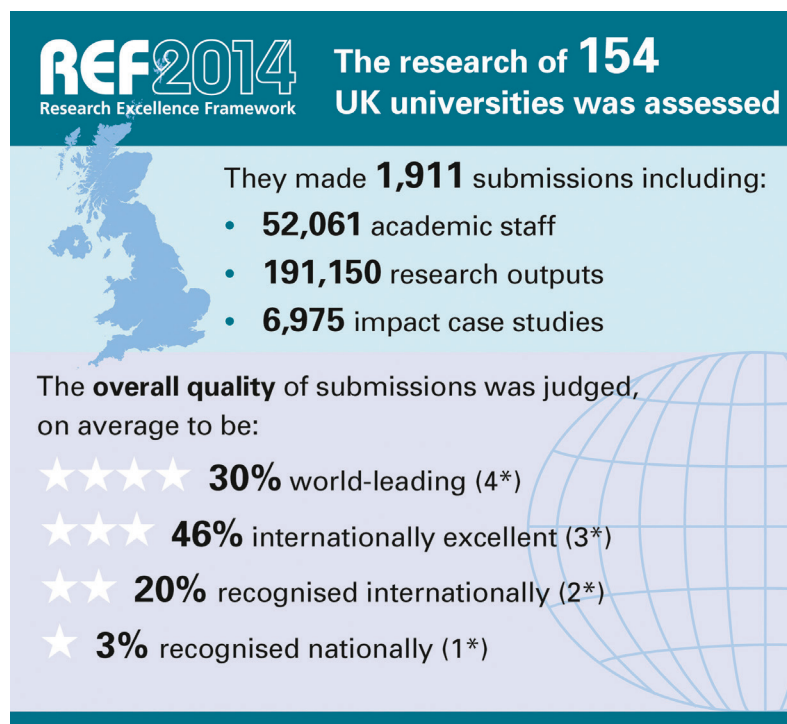
The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's world-leading system for assessing the excellence of research in higher education institutions. The REF outcomes are used to calculate about £2 billion per year of public funding for universities' research, and affect their international reputations. The results also inform strategic decisions about national research priorities. The next REF will be undertaken in 2021 by the four UK higher education funding bodies.

The REF was first carried out in 2014, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise. It included for the first time an assessment of the broader impact of universities' research beyond academia: on the economy, society, culture, public policy and services, health, the environment and quality of life – within the UK and internationally.

REF expert panels assess universities' submissions, including the quality of research outputs, the impacts achieved that have been underpinned by excellent research, and the research environment. The panels comprise academics and research user members from outside of academia. Research users may be from the private, public or third sectors, and will be individuals who make use of university research in their organisation or professional activity - by commissioning research or collaborating with academic researchers, for example.

In 2014, 44 per cent of impacts were judged to be outstanding

Impact is assessed through the submission of case studies, which describe the changes or benefits brought about by research undertaken by researchers at a higher education institution. In REF 2014, 36 expert panels covering the broad range of academic disciplines worked under four main panels to assess 1,911 submissions, including almost 7,000 impact case studies. Across all disciplines, 44 per cent of impacts were judged to be outstanding. This reflects universities' productive engagements with a very wide range of public, private and third sector organisations, and direct engagement with the public.



Revisions to REF due to COVID-19

As you may be aware the REF was paused by the four UK funding bodies in March 2020 in response to the effects of COVID-19. We have recently announced a formal recommencement date of 31 July 2020, with a revised submission deadline of midday, 31 March 2021.

The assessment of submissions was originally scheduled to take place between January and October 2021, with preparatory meetings to take place in 2020. Following the delay to the exercise, the assessment timeframe will now take place between May 2021 and February 2022, with preparatory meetings to take place in 2020 and early 2021.

What role do impact assessors play?

To ensure they have the full breadth and depth of expertise required to assess the submitted case studies, the REF panels will appoint 'impact assessors' who will work with the other panel members to assess the impact element of submissions, attending relevant panel meetings and providing advice on the impact case studies they have assessed.

Impact assessors are individuals from outside academia with relevant skills and experience in using research. With their experience of working with research and researchers, research users play a vital role in the REF; working with panels to evaluate the reach and significance of research impacts beyond academia. In the 2014 REF, these roles were highly valued by the UK's research community and their contribution was described as 'hugely beneficial' and 'invaluable to the process'.

What are the benefits for research users of taking part?

Over 250 research users, including impact assessors, participated in the expert panels in REF 2014. They enjoyed bringing their professional perspectives to the assessment and appreciated the opportunity to contribute to a crucial part of the UK's research funding landscape. According to their feedback, the REF gave them:

- Insight into current developments in research relevant to their professional lives
- Excellent networking opportunities with research leaders and senior professionals in private, public or third sectors
- An enhanced appreciation of the connections that can be made between researchers and stakeholders
- Increased understanding of the potential barriers to engagement with researchers and how to overcome them
- Opportunities to encourage better understanding of organisations' research needs
- A chance to contribute to the allocation of public funds

What is expected?

Impact assessors will be allocated a number of impact case studies to assess, reflecting their expertise and interests. They will consider the reach and significance of impact achieved, as evidenced in individual impact case studies, in accordance with published criteria. Impact assessors may also be involved in assessing relevant sections of the environment for supporting research and enabling impact.

**Research users
have a key role
on REF panels**

**Insight into
current
developments
in research**

The precise workload will vary according to the sub-panel to which an assessor is appointed. A guide to the time commitment is outlined below:

Impact assessor: guide to time commitment	
2020	Attend online introductory meeting of the sub-panel Attend online briefing event for new panel members and assessors Time commitment: 2 x 0.5 days
2021-2022	Participate in all meetings of the sub-panel relating to impact (including preparation, calibration and assessment) Time commitment: equivalent to 4 to 6 full meeting days, plus 6 to 10 days to review materials

As part of our contingency planning in response to COVID-19, we are exploring whether parts of the assessment process will need to be held on a virtual basis. This is likely to result in shorter but more frequent meetings of the sub-panels. However, where it is safe and appropriate to meet in person, some meetings are likely to be held over several days and may involve staying away. If you are interested in a role as an impact assessor and have questions or concerns about the workload involved, please contact info@ref.ac.uk.

Fees and expenses

Impact assessors will receive a fixed fee of £1800 per financial year. This fee has been increased from the originally proposed fee by the four UK funding bodies, in recognition of the value of the role that research users play on the panels and the challenges presented in the current context. Travel and subsistence expenses will be reimbursed according to an agreed scheme.

Equality and Diversity

The funding bodies recognise that diversity of thought and experience contributes fundamental insight and value to the work of the REF panels. Nominations for impact assessors are therefore encouraged from diverse candidates, in particular from women, people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, LGBT+ people and those with disabilities.

How to apply to be a REF panel member

Panel members are appointed through a nominations process. Nominations may be made through any association or organisation with a clear interest in the conduct, quality, funding or wider benefits of publicly funded research except for mission groups and individual UK universities. Information on the nominations process can be found at: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/nominating-panel-members/>

Deadline for nominations: 7 September 2020

Questions? Please contact Myles Furr at info@ref.ac.uk.