

September 2020

REF 2021 Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel

Interim report

EDAP Interim Report

Introduction

1. As a key measure to support equality and diversity in REF 2021, the Funding Bodies agreed that institutions would be entitled to submit cases for staff circumstances so that they could be assessed, and feedback provided, in advance of the REF submission deadline. Although the 'clock stopped' for other aspects of REF at the end of March this year, the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) went ahead with their assessments of circumstances requests broadly in line with the original timetable, although ensuring that any requests for further information from HEIs were sent when the exercise had restarted, unless the HEI opted to receive these at an earlier date.

2. EDAP has now assessed all of the REF 6a and 6b requests that were submitted in early March, and feedback has been provided to institutions in parallel with this report being published. The assessment was carried out entirely virtually, and worked far better than we initially anticipated.

3. Circumstances requests were submitted by 58% of institutions intending to participate in REF 2021, across both REF6a and REF6b. The Funding Bodies received a total of 179 requests for removal of the minimum of one requirement (via REF 6a), and 461 requests for unit reductions (via REF 6b). The latter included a total of 4099 individual staff circumstances requests. For both request processes, cases were most commonly submitted for early career researchers.

4. When considering staff circumstances, EDAP's role was to consider whether the 'Guidance on submissions' had been appropriately applied, and that there was sufficient evidence in the submission statement to enable them to make this judgement. It was not EDAP's role to verify that the circumstances had taken place as outlined in the request. Where EDAP had any concerns in relation to this, they could flag the case for audit. Similarly, cases could be flagged for audit if there were doubts that circumstance requests had resulted from a voluntary declaration process, or whether the researcher concerned had an eligible output in the case of 6a requests. In a few instances, EDAP was concerned that information (e.g. for early career researchers) had been taken from HR records rather than via the declaration process. HR records can be used to verify declared circumstances but should not be the sole basis for a circumstances request.

EDAP working methods

5. Each 6a and 6b request (comprising the rationale statement and underpinning staff circumstances) was assessed independently by two EDAP members. Efforts were made to ensure that assessors were paired with a range of co-assessors. For all cases where the two assessors recommended different outcomes, the panel Chair acted as a third assessor. In some instances, it was determined that a request should be taken to the full panel for a wider discussion during one of the assessment meetings. EDAP members undertook a calibration exercise before stating their assessments, to support consistency of judgements. Further

consistency checks were carried out throughout the exercise and following its completion to ensure robustness. For cases where there was insufficient detail provided to make a judgement, EDAP requested further information from the institution concerned (see below). It was made clear to institutions that in providing the further information, we did not expect them to go back to the researchers themselves; rather the information should be taken from institutional records (primarily the declaration form).

REF 6a – removal of the minimum of one requirement

6. In REF 2021, all eligible staff with significant responsibility for research have to be submitted with a minimum of one output. In order to recognise the impact that equality-related circumstances may have had on individuals over the assessment period, resulting in their being unable to produce a REF eligible output, institutions could request the removal of the minimum of one requirement provided that cases met the criteria specified in the 'Guidance on submissions'.

7. Of the 179 REF 6a requests assessed by EDAP, 148 (83%) were confirmed as having met the guidance, while less than 5% were judged not to have met the guidance. For the remainder, either the case was withdrawn or EDAP was not able to make a recommendation on the basis of the evidence provided. For 61 of the 179 submissions (34%) we required further information from institutions before we were able to make a judgement.

8. The majority of requests for further information were sent because institutions did not make it clear how the described circumstances had impacted on research productivity to the extent that the researcher was unable to produce an eligible output, or they did not explain how they determined that the impact of the circumstances equated to an absence of 46 months or more from research, or because it was not clear whether or not the researcher had an eligible output.

9. In contrast, the strongest cases clearly outlined the nature of the circumstances, with timeframes, described how they impacted on research productivity and how this met the criteria set out in the guidelines, and confirmed that the researcher did not have an eligible output. Although we did not require as much detail on circumstances to be provided in REF 2021 as in REF 2014, some institutions provided virtually no detail, just stating for example 'circumstances equating to 53 months absence'. Others provided no information about timeframes for maternity leave or early career researchers. In such cases, a request for further information was sent.

10. Cases were not approved where, despite providing sufficient information in the statement, it was clear that the circumstances did not meet the criteria set out in the guidance. For a very small number of cases, EDAP judged the particular circumstances to be so severe and disruptive, that they deemed the impact equated to the circumstances cases set out in the guidance, even though the impacted time period fell just short of the 46 month cut-off. In general, however EDAP did not accept cases that fell short 46 months, in order to ensure parity with institutions who may not have submitted a case because the impacted period was only 44 months, for example.

11. EDAP noted that a small number of institutions appeared to have confused the submission requirements between 6a and 6b circumstances requests. For example, when referring to a staff

member's ECR status, they referred to the allowances set out in table L1 in the Guidance on Submissions (e.g. a 0.5 output reduction) rather than determining the months lost from the start of the census period, and combining this with the impact of other circumstances outlined in the case.

12. Finally, it is worth noting a point of concern raised by panel members when making their assessments. Given that many of the circumstances outlined in 6a requests had occurred over a relatively long period of time, EDAP queried whether adequate support had been provided to the researchers, and whether appropriate reasonable adjustments had been put in place for disabled staff, including those with long-term health conditions. This point was also raised when assessing some of the circumstance requests associated with 6b submissions.

6b – Unit reduction requests

13. For REF 2021, institutions could ask for a reduction to the number of outputs required in one or more of its submitting units, where it was felt that equality-related circumstances disclosed by staff members within the unit had a disproportionate impact on the size of the available output pool. However, given the flexibility offered by the decoupling of staff and outputs, it was expected that institutions would not routinely need to submit unit reduction requests. Each institution was required to set out in its code of practice its processes for determining whether a unit reduction request would be made. It is not surprising, therefore, that institutions applied different strategies in determining how many submissions to make, and on what basis. The mean number of unit requests for any one institution varied from zero to 100% of UOAs in which the institution is intending to submit. In making its assessments, EDAP judged each case on the basis of the evidence provided irrespective of the particular strategy adopted by the institution.

Rationale Statements

14. Where a unit reduction request was made, institutions had to provide a statement outlining the context of the unit, how the declared circumstances affected the unit's output pool, and how the HEI determined this in accordance with their REF Code of Practice. Relatively few institutions explicitly referenced their code of practice in their unit rationale statements, presumably because only a minority of codes outlined specific criteria for determining disproportionality. Where necessary, EDAP checked the relevant section in the code. However, we also expected institutions to explain in each rationale statement why in applying their code they felt that the output pool had been disproportionately impacted, given the specific context of the unit in question.

15. In making its judgements on unit rationale statements, EDAP considered the size of the unit (both in terms of headcount and FTE), the proportion of staff who declared, the potential impact on other staff members, the anticipated reduction to the size of the available output pool, and any relevant factors linked to academic discipline or subject field. Where information about unit size was not included in the statement, EDAP referred to data submitted in the Survey of Submission Intentions. Through the process of calibration, to develop a common understanding of disproportionality and apply this consistently in reaching recommendations, EDAP found it helpful to explicate some broad rules of thumb. We agreed that these would primarily be used for sense checking assessments we had made, rather than for driving initial decision making.

Broadly speaking, the panel agreed that where 15% or more of staff members in a unit had declared eligible circumstances, and clear information was provided in the rationale statement, they would accept that a case for disproportionality had been made. In contrast, where the staff declaration rate was 10% and lower, EDAP felt that the impact could be accommodated with the flexibility provided by the decoupling of staff and outputs, unless very exceptional factors had been raised. For cases where declaration rates fell between these levels, the panel's judgements were primarily influenced by factors outlined in the rationale statement, such as the size of the unit, the proportion of staff who were working part-time (particularly at low FTEs), and the publication profile of the discipline. Towards the end of the exercise, EDAP consulted with Main Panel chairs who confirmed that the panel was taking account of discipline-related information in an appropriate way. Despite this reassurance, EDAP felt that where discipline-related factors, such as the prevalence of monographs, or portfolio-based outputs, were referred to in the statement, it would be helpful if institutions were more explicit about why such factors were relevant.

16. Of the 461 rationale statements assessed by EDAP, 404 (88%) were judged to have made a clear case for the cumulative effect of circumstances having disproportionately impacted on the size of the output pool. For the remaining 56 (12%), the panel did not consider that the information provided evidenced a disproportionate effect, and therefore it was agreed that the impact of the circumstances could be accommodated within the flexibility provided by decoupling. In the latter case, it was expected that institutions would continue to provide support and adjust expectations as appropriate for those staff members with equality-related circumstances. For 29 cases, further information was needed before the panel could make its judgement. In most cases, this was because the statement had not made it clear how the unit had been impacted by the circumstances and why they considered the impact to be disproportionate.

17. Several institutions referred to information that was not equality-related when making a case for disproportionality. In such cases, EDAP made its judgements on the basis of the equality-related information only. This was also the case for statements associated with some staff circumstances requiring a judgement.

6b Staff circumstances

18. Alongside the rationale statement, institutions submitted information about the individual circumstances that had been declared by staff within the unit. Where applicable, this included the circumstances of staff for whom a request to remove the minimum of one requirement was being made. For defined circumstances, the reduction requested was taken from the tables set out in Annex L of the Guidance on Submissions. For circumstances that required a judgement, institutions had to submit a brief outline of the nature of the circumstance/s, and how the institution determined an appropriate reduction. For any one individual the total reduction requested could not exceed 1.5 outputs.

19. Of the 4099 submitted cases for individual staff circumstances associated with 6b requests, over 98% were accepted by EDAP, whereas just over 1% were judged not to have met the guidance for the requested reduction. For 63 cases, further information was needed before the panel could make its judgement. In most cases, this was because institutions had not made

it clear how the circumstances had impacted on research productivity, the timeframes involved, or how they had determined the appropriate reduction.

20. The strongest cases clearly outlined the circumstances with sufficient information so that EDAP could make a judgement, but without including unnecessary sensitive information. They also made timeframes explicit, and clearly outlined how the circumstances had impacted on the researcher's ability to research productively, and how they calculated the time-period affected. In contrast, most cases that were considered not to have met the guidance failed to reach the threshold for the requested reduction. Where appropriate, the requested reduction was amended to a lower tariff or, where this was not possible, the case was not accepted. Furthermore, some cases referred to factors that were not equality-related and did not fall under the applicable circumstances set out in the guidance. For some cases (e.g. divorce, legal proceedings) unless the statement made it clear that the circumstances affected the individual's wellbeing to the extent that it impacted on research productivity, EDAP had to deem the circumstances to be non-applicable. A few institutions referred to circumstances occurring during a period when the researcher should have been on research leave, and made an additional allowance for this. Although EDAP sympathised with the researcher concerned, they were not able to make an additional allowance for the loss of research leave when determining the appropriate reduction. The panel also noted that the guidance in relation to combining circumstances, where a staff member had two or more applicable circumstances during the assessment period, was being interpreted in different ways by some institutions. In order to improve consistency of application, the REF team will include an additional FAQ on the REF 2021 website.

21. Finally, some confusion between 6a and 6b requests was also apparent when assessing 6b circumstances requests. For example, some institutions included part-time working in their calculations of time lost from research, even when the FTE remained at the same level throughout the assessment period. This was not appropriate as FTE was taken into account in determining the total number of outputs a unit had to submit. Although calculating time lost from research for part-time staff was appropriate for 6a requests, for 6b requests, part-time working could only be included where the FTE on the census date was notably different from earlier in the assessment period. Furthermore, a small number of institutions referred to the inclusion of a 6a request in their rationale statement but failed to include this in their 6b submission, possibly because they believed it to be an automatic process. The panel also noted that for some institutions falling within Main Panel A, the proportion of Junior Clinical Academics who declared circumstances was lower than the number of such staff in the unit. It is not clear whether this is because the researchers concerned had sufficient outputs, or because they understood the reduction allowance would be applied automatically.

Concluding comments

22. Overall, EDAP was pleased that the vast majority of institutions had appropriately applied the guidance when submitting their requests for removal of the minimal of one requirement and for requesting reductions to the total number of outputs a unit should submit. In writing this interim report, EDAP very much hopes that institutions will take account of the above points when applying reductions in March 2021, so that an even greater proportion of submissions can

be accepted. At that stage, new requests for the removal of the minimum of one requirement can include circumstances arising from disruption to research as a result of COVID19. In such cases, institutions will need to demonstrate how COVID-19, together with equality-related circumstances, had impacted on research productivity for 46 months or more.

23. With the current revised time-schedule, EDAP is expecting to publish its final report, reflecting on its experiences over the entire exercise, in July 2022.