

21<sup>st</sup> January 2021

*By email*

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Dear Vice-chancellor or Principal,

**Research Excellence Framework 2021: decisions on further contingency measures**

1. In view of the increased COVID-19 infection rate and the related measures introduced across the four nations of the UK in early January 2021, the funding bodies have reviewed whether any further contingency arrangements should be put in place for REF 2021. I am writing to you to confirm the decisions that the funding bodies have taken on this matter. Some of the arrangements will require further detail, which we will provide by 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

2. The funding bodies and the REF team understand the challenges posed by the wider context in finalising the preparation of REF submissions. In particular, we know that the availability of clinical staff to input into submission preparation has been greatly affected by redeployment of many clinical and health-related staff to frontline services in the NHS. We also recognise that the involvement of research management and administration staff is critical at this stage of the submission process, and that the current lockdown restrictions, school closures and wider institutional priorities are likely to affect both academic and professional services staff capacity during this period. We recognise this may be particularly acute for some institutions that have very limited resource available to manage submission processes. A continued challenge is also posed in preparing physical outputs for delivery to the REF library.

3. It remains important to recognise the considerable investment made by institutions in the submission process to date. Additionally, we acknowledge the significant effort that has gone into preparing submissions for 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021, and the need institutions have to direct resource to other priorities in the period ahead. We understand that there will be wide variation across institutions in the extent to which REF preparations are being impacted by COVID-19. We have not received evidence widely supporting any further general delay to the process and do not wish for further resource to be invested by institutions beyond what is needed to complete the submission process.

4. The funding bodies have therefore agreed additional measures that seek to balance the above issues together, along with the aim of minimising effects on the assessment schedule for the panels. The following arrangements are intended to help institutions to support staff wellbeing and manage resource in the most appropriate way for them, and to mitigate risks around individual institutions being unable to meet the submission deadline.

### **Measures to support institutions**

5. **The upfront provision of corroborating evidence for impact case studies has been made optional.** This means that institutions will not be required to upload the corroborating evidence for submitted impact cases studies to the submission system by 1<sup>st</sup> June 2021, although they may still choose to do so where preferred. Where the corroborating evidence is not provided upfront, it should be held by the institution in the event of audit. Evidence retained by institutions will not need to be prepared in a ZIP file in accordance with the instructions for uploading corroborating evidence to the submission system. There will be no difference in the rate of audit requests for the corroborating evidence, or in the assessment process for an impact case study, on the basis of whether or not the corroborating evidence has been directly uploaded.

6. **Institutions will be able to request an extension of up to six weeks, until noon on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2021, for uploading the narrative templates (impact case studies and the unit and institutional-level environment templates) for one or more of their submissions.**

- Requests may be made where additional time is needed to finalise these parts of submissions, due to the effects of COVID-19. This provision is intended to allow for exceptional circumstances, where there is a significant problem preventing an institution from finalising one or more submissions by 31<sup>st</sup> March. It is not expected to be used to facilitate more detailed refinements of submissions that are otherwise complete.
- We will provide a short form for requesting an extension by 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021, along with details of how to return it to the REF team. This will need to list the submissions and length of time for which an extension is requested. Institutions will need to return completed forms by 5<sup>th</sup> March 2021. Requests will be reviewed by the REF Director; where any concerns are identified, these will be discussed with the REF Steering Group prior to confirming request outcomes. Confirmation of requests will typically be provided within one week.
- We will provide details of the changes needed in the submission system relating to this measure by 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021.
- Any requested extensions will be optional to apply; narrative templates should be uploaded as soon as they are finalised, which may be in advance of the requested extension date.
- Where an extension has been requested, institutions will still need to complete the remaining data requirements in form REF3 by the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.

7. **There will be a six-week period, up until noon on 14<sup>th</sup> May 2021, for providing any corrections to errors identified in the submitted data following the submission deadline on 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021.**

- During this period, institutions will be able to submit details of data corrections to the REF team via the audit system.
- There will be some limitations around the data items that can be corrected after submission (for example, it won't be possible to replace a submitted output; but it will be possible to correct errors in data associated with it).
- Further details about the scope of corrections that may be made and the process for submitting them will be published by 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021.
- During this period also, we will invite institutions to provide any adjustments to staff data held by Research England from the HESA staff return. This moves back the period for staff data adjustments, from our previously publicised timing of early February 2021. We will provide the standard analyses to the panels only following completion of staff data adjustments.

8. **Additional flexibility will be built into the audit process.** This will include a later, phased start to the audit of staff data, to minimise overlap between the activity described in paragraph 7 above. We will also take a fair, consistent and understanding approach to data verification, including in relation to the stated response times. An updated audit timetable will be published by 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021.

### **Contingency arrangements around the submission deadline**

9. The funding bodies recognise that, even with the above measures in place, there remains a risk that unexpected circumstances close to the submission deadline may affect the ability of an individual institution to meet the deadline as planned.

10. In response to this risk, the funding bodies will put in place a mechanism to review any emergency requests for an individual extension to the submission deadline of 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021. Any requests received will be considered on a case-by-case basis, with the aim of supporting participation in the exercise wherever possible, while giving due regard to the effect of any delay on the panels' assessment.

11. In the event that your institution is affected in this way close to the submission deadline, please contact [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) in the first instance.

### **Further information**

12. The funding bodies recognise that the challenges affecting the preparation of physical outputs may have increased in the current context. As outlined in my letter of 23<sup>rd</sup> November 2020, we are implementing a flexible approach to the delivery of physical outputs to the REF

library. This continues to aim for outputs to be delivered in sufficient time for the assessment, while being able to respond to these increased challenges. We are working with institutions individually to identify a feasible delivery schedule, which may include delivery in batches. We understand that discussions may need to be ongoing or revisited through the continuing period of uncertainty ahead. Please contact [library@ref.ac.uk](mailto:library@ref.ac.uk) with any questions or concerns relating to the delivery of physical outputs.

13. We are also aware that there are challenges facing the preparation of some outputs for electronic submission, including around access to required material and uncertainty around the full requirements. We will shortly produce a further FAQ to help clarify the requirements in this area and respond to challenges identified. However, where institutions remain unable to source or prepare outputs for electronic submission by 31<sup>st</sup> March 2021, these should instead be returned as physical outputs and incorporated into the flexible delivery planning outlined above.

14. We have updated the equality impact assessment conducted on the effects of COVID, and the subsequent revisions to the exercise, to reflect these additional mitigations. The updated version will be available shortly on the REF website ([www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)) under 'Equality and diversity'.

15. We are aware that the extended periods of COVID restrictions and high infection rates may introduce further challenges for the assessment year. We continue to closely monitor where additional mitigating support to the panels may be needed, and are working with the expert panels on this contingency planning.

16. If you have any queries about any of the information contained in this letter please contact [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Kim Hackett', written in a cursive style.

Dr Kim Hackett  
REF Director