

Briefing on REF 2021 and request for information from HE branches on REF staff selection

On 23 July the UK funding bodies published draft guidance on REF 2021. The documents include the *Consultation on draft panel criteria and working methods*, *REF 2021: Draft Guidance on Submissions* and *REF 2021: Guidance on codes of practice*.¹ This briefing paper summarises a number of the key elements in the consultation documents and requests further information from branches on developments at your institution.

Guidance on Submissions

The key document is the *Draft Guidance on Submissions* which sets out the main criteria in relation to institutional REF submissions. New staff eligibility and selection procedures such as the requirement that HEIs must return all staff with “significant responsibility for research” are particularly important for UCU branches and members.

In addition, the draft guidance confirms that each member of staff submitted will have one output attributed to them, and no single member of staff can be linked to more than five outputs (NB: the average number of output required per FTE will be 2.5). This is a major change from REF 2014.

The consultation document states that “Category A eligible staff are defined as academic staff with a contract of employment of 0.2 FTE or greater...whose primary employment function is to undertake either ‘research only’ or ‘teaching and research’” (paragraph 119).

Institutions have two main options in relation to the submission of staff on ‘teaching and research’ contracts. Option A is to submit 100% of eligible staff whereas option B allows submitting units to provide evidence as to why some staff on ‘teaching and research’ contracts **do not** have a ‘significant responsibility for research’ and therefore will not be included in the REF submission (paragraph 134).

In terms of option (B), the draft guidance lists a number of indicators of “significant responsibility for research” (paragraph 140). These include:

1. **‘Explicit time and resources are made available’** – such as a specific proportion of time allocated for research, as determined in the context of the institution’s practices, or research allocation in a workload model or equivalent.
2. **‘To engage actively in independent research’** – such as eligibility to apply for research funding as the lead or co-applicant, access to research leave or sabbaticals, or membership of research centres or institutes within the HEI.
3. **‘Expectations of their job role’** - such as current research responsibilities as indicated in, for example, career pathways or stated objectives, or expectations of research by role as indicated in, for example, job descriptions and appraisals.

The document says that the submission approach “may vary by UOA where employment practices vary at this level” and that the “institution’s criteria for identifying staff should be developed collaboratively with the *academic staff body* and evidence of institution-wide consultation” (paragraphs 140-141, emphasis added).

¹ The three documents are available at www.ref.ac.uk

In essence, the same eligibility rules apply to staff on 'research only' contracts. However, as in the previous REF, staff on 'research only' contracts will also be required to meet the definition of an "independent researcher". The guidance lists a range of indicators of 'research independence' such as acting as a principal or co-investigator on a funded project or leading a research group (see paragraphs 128-133).

The funding bodies have published a useful flow chart on 'Staff eligibility in REF 2021' which is reproduced as an appendix to this paper.²

Codes of practice

The funding bodies have also published *Draft Guidance on Codes of Practice*.

As with REF 2014, institutions will be required to develop, document and apply a code of practice. This should cover the processes for a) identifying staff with significant responsibility for research (where applicable); b) determining who is an 'independent researcher'; and c) the selection of research outputs.

All of these processes have significant implications for academic careers and therefore imply a key role for UCU representatives.

In fact, the draft guidance says that the code of practice should describe the development of the policy and procedures, including details about "the staff representative mechanisms in place in the HEI, how the appropriate staff representatives were engaged in the process, and evidence of agreement with appropriate staff representation."

Equality and diversity procedures

The guidance on submissions and codes of practice have a number of specific elements relating to equality and diversity.

One of the most significant is the role that 'staff circumstances' can play in determining a reduction in the 2.5 outputs per FTE without penalty in the assessment. The document lists a number of "applicable circumstances" such as early career status, disability and maternity leave which constrain the ability of staff to produce outputs during the assessment period (see paragraphs 149 to 193).

In addition, the codes of practice will require institutions to ensure that their selection processes are compatible with equality legislation and that they have been subject to an Equality Impact Assessment (EIA). The codes of practice must include information on REF committees, training processes and appeals procedures. It also must include a statement on how the institution supports its fixed-term and part-time staff, in relation to equality and diversity.

Next steps

UCU will be submitting a response to the consultation on REF submissions and would welcome your views on any aspect of the REF 2021 consultation.

²Reproduced from *REF 2021: Draft Guidance on submissions (p.44)*:
http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref,2021/downloads/Draft%20Guidance%20on%20submissions%20REF%202018_1.pdf

In addition, the Higher Education Committee will be organising a conference for branches later in the year to discuss institutional developments regarding the REF, particularly in relation to contractual developments.

Following a motion at the HE sector conference in May, we will also be involved in specific work on the REF and the Post 92 contract / Contract 2000. A separate survey on this topic will follow shortly.

In the meantime, in order to try to influence the outcome of the official consultation on REF 2021, we need to find out more about what is happening at the local level, especially in relation to staff selection procedures.

Below is a non-exhaustive list of issues that we would welcome feedback on and, where possible, concrete examples.

1. What is happening in relation to the REF code of practice at your HEI? Is your institution involving the UCU branch (as the 'appropriate staff representative') in drawing up their code of practice? Within the institution, where are the discussions taking place, e.g. at the JNC, or via the Academic Board/Senate?
2. Is there agreement to submit 100% of academic staff on 'teaching and research' contracts at your HEI and/or submitting unit?
3. Are there attempts to change academic staff contracts from 'teaching and research' contracts to 'teaching and scholarship' as a response to the new REF 2021 rules?
4. Is your HEI and/or submitting unit considering more informal measures to exclude academic staff from REF 2021?

For example, are they exploring workload allocation models, i.e. agreeing a proportion of time that has to be spent on research to qualify as "significant"? What about indicators such as staff access to research leave/sabbaticals or membership of research centres or institutes within the HEI? Are they looking at expectations of research by job role such as job descriptions and appraisals?

5. What is happening at your HEI and/or submitting unit regarding the selection of 'research only' staff, in particular the issue of determining 'research independence'? How is this playing out in relation to different subject areas and the classification of job titles (e.g. 'research assistants')?
6. What is your HEI doing to ensure proper equality and diversity procedures in relation to institutional selection procedures? For example, how is your institution proposing to deal with 'staff circumstances' such as disability and ill-health? How are they addressing the issue of fixed-term and part-time staff in relation to equality and diversity?

Please can you send in your comments and examples to Rob Copeland, policy officer, rcopeland@ucu.org.uk by no later than 5 October 2018.

Appendix

Figure 1

Staff eligibility in REF 2021

REF2021 Research Excellence Framework

