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**REF** 2020/02  
July 2020

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# Guidance on revisions to REF 2021

This document describes the revisions to the timetable for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 and the changes and additions made to the guidance to take account of the effects of COVID-19. The revised deadline for submissions is midday, 31 March 2021.

**REF** 2021 Research  
Excellence  
Framework

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**To**

Heads of higher education institutions in the UK

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**Of interest to those responsible for**  
Research

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**Reference**

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July 2020

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**Enquiries from staff at UK higher education institutions**

Email your institutional REF contact (These are listed at [ref.ac.uk](http://ref.ac.uk) under Contact)

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## Executive summary

### Purpose

1. This document describes the revisions to the timetable for the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2021 following the period during which the exercise was on hold, and the changes and additions made to the guidance to take account of the effects of COVID-19.

### Key points

2. The revised deadline for submissions is midday, 31 March 2021.

3. Changes and additions to the guidance are set out in relation to each element of submissions, including:

- Removing the minimum of one output requirement.
- Provision for submitting delayed outputs.
- An extension to the assessment period for impact case studies.
- Further guidance on the environment.

### Action required

4. This document is for information, to guide institutions in preparing and collecting data for inclusion in REF submissions.

### Further information

5. Further information about the REF is available at [ref.ac.uk](http://ref.ac.uk).

6. Enquiries from members of staff at UK higher education institutions (HEIs) should be directed in the first instance to their institutional REF contact. These contacts for each institution are listed at [ref.ac.uk](http://ref.ac.uk) under Contact.

7. Other enquiries should be addressed to [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk).

## Introduction

8. The REF is the system for assessing research in UK HEIs. REF 2021 was scheduled to complete in December 2021. In March 2020, the funding bodies put the exercise on hold in response to the effects of COVID-19. Following a period of wide engagement, a revised submission deadline of midday 31 March 2021 was announced in June 2020. The exercise recommences on 31 July 2020.

9. To take account of the effects of COVID-19 on institutions' REF submissions, the funding bodies have agreed a set of revisions to the exercise. These decisions followed a further period of engagement with the higher education sector and partners.

10. This document describes the revisions to the timetable for REF 2021, following the period during which it was on hold, and the changes and additions made to the guidance to take account of the effects of COVID-19. This document therefore acts as an addendum to, and where applicable supersedes, the following original guidance documentation:

- 'Guidance on submissions' (2019/01).
- 'Panel criteria and working methods' (2019/02).
- 'Guidance on codes of practice' (2019/03).
- 'Audit guidance' (2019/04).
- 'Institutional-level environment pilot: supplementary guidance on submissions and panel criteria and working methods' (2019/06).
- Invitation to submit staff circumstances reduction requests.
- Invitation to submit to REF 2021.

11. Alongside this document, the REF team has published 'Advice on contingency planning' (2020/03). The publication provides advice on contingency planning that HEIs may wish to implement in order to minimise further disruption to the process of making REF submissions.

12. The REF is conducted jointly by Research England (RE), the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW) and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE). The REF is managed by the REF team, based at RE, on behalf of the four UK HE funding bodies, and is overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the four funding bodies. In this document, 'we' refers to the REF team.

## Summary of revisions

13. This document describes the changes and additions made to the guidance for REF 2021, following the effects of COVID-19. In summary, the revisions are:

- a. Submission deadline: an extension to the submission deadline for the exercise, to midday, 31 March 2021. Associated deadlines, including the date for submitting corroborating evidence for impact, have also been revised.
- b. Staff (REF1 a/b): additional guidance on submitting staff who are furloughed on the census date; and an additional provision to incorporate circumstances related to COVID-19 in the reduction process for removing the minimum of one output requirement.

- c. Outputs (REF2): provision for the submission of outputs delayed by COVID-19, where the output was expected to be out by 31 December 2020, including an optional statement to explain the form of the output to the panel; guidance on applying exceptions to the open access requirements in the event of COVID-19 related disruption, and information on changes to the open access risk identification process as a result; and confirmation that the provision for pending outputs no longer applies.
- d. Impact (REF3): an extension to the assessment period for impact case studies, to 31 December 2020; provision for listing delayed outputs as underpinning research; and inclusion of an optional statement, where contextual information is required for the panel to understand aspects of the submitted case study.
- e. Environment (REF4a/b/c, REF5a/b): submission of a COVID-19 annex to the institutional-level environment statement, to describe the particular changes affecting the institution's research and impact environment as a result of COVID-19 and how the institution has responded; guidance on addressing future strategy in the environment narratives.
- f. Codes of practice: additional guidance relating to any necessary changes to codes of practice, arising from the changes to the timetable or wider revisions to the exercise.
- g. Audit: additions to the data verification process and amendments to the audit timetable, to take account of the wider revisions to the exercise.

## **Submission deadline**

14. The deadline for submissions is midday, 31 March 2021. This deadline applies to all elements of a submission, except for those aspects described below in paragraph 16. A submission comprises a complete set of data about staff, outputs, impact and the environment returned by an HEI in any of the 34 units of assessment (UOAs).

15. Submissions will be assessed by the REF panels during the period May 2021 to March 2022. Results are expected in April 2022 and are intended to be used by the funding bodies to inform research funding from the academic year 2022–23.

16. The revised date for providing corroborating evidence for impact case studies, and redacted versions of REF3 and REF5a/b templates is 1 June 2021. These should be provided through the submission system.

17. A revised timetable for REF 2021 overall is set out at Annex A. Detailed timetables setting out, in turn, key dates for audit and the publication of citation information are provided at Annex D.

## **Staff (REF1a/b)**

18. Where staff meet the eligibility requirements set out in paragraphs 117 to 122 of the 'Guidance on submissions' and on the census date are on furlough under the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme, they remain eligible for submission. The FTE of the staff member's qualifying contract should be returned. Decisions in relation to eligibility should be taken in accordance with the processes set out in the institution's code of practice, in relation to the staff member's role prior to furlough, as covered by the qualifying contract. Processes to determine staff eligibility can be run retrospectively. Further guidance on codes of practice is set out below (paragraphs 76 to 84).

19. As set out in the 'Guidance on submissions', all organisations processing personally identifiable information should ensure that information about its use is provided to the data subjects in accordance with the transparency requirements of data protection law. To assist institutions in ensuring that individuals included in their submissions are aware of these uses, we provided a model data collection statement for institutions to adapt to their own circumstances. We have now updated this statement in line with the revised guidance. The model statement is available on the REF website (ref.ac.uk), along with an updated fair processing notice for staff submitted to REF 2021.

### **Removing the 'minimum of one' requirement**

20. This section describes how and when institutions may remove the minimum of one requirement where the combination of individual staff circumstances earlier in the assessment period and the effects of COVID-19 has had an exceptional effect so that a staff member has not been able to produce an eligible output. This provision follows the existing REF6a reduction process, to ensure the equitable treatment of equality-related circumstances in allowing removal of the minimum of one requirement.

21. In addition to the existing guidance for REF6a reductions, the minimum of one output requirement may be removed for a Category A submitted staff member that has not been able to produce an eligible output<sup>1</sup>, where the following circumstances apply:

- a. Output(s) in the process of being produced have been affected by COVID-19 during the assessment period (1 January 2014 to 31 July 2020). This includes effects due to applicable circumstances (such as ill health, caring responsibilities); other personal circumstances related to COVID-19 (such as furloughed staff, health-related or clinical staff diverted to frontline services, staff resource diverted to other priority areas within the HEI in response to COVID-19); and/or external factors related to COVID-19 (for example, restricted access to research facilities);  
**and**
- b. The overall impact of the COVID-19 effects, combined with other applicable circumstances affecting the staff member's ability to research productively during the assessment period, is deemed similar to the impact of the circumstances cases set out at paragraph 179a. to c. of the 'Guidance on submissions'. For example, where a staff member is an early career researcher, or has held a fractional contract for a significant proportion of the assessment period, and has experienced COVID-19 related disruption to the production of an eligible output<sup>2</sup>.

22. Where an institution wishes to remove the minimum of one requirement according to the guidance in paragraph 21 above, a REF6a form should be included for the staff member by the submission deadline. Where a REF6a reduction is applied, the staff member should be returned with no outputs attributed to them in the submission, and the total outputs required by the unit will be reduced by one.

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<sup>1</sup> In line with existing guidance, this means there is no output attributable to the staff member by 31 July 2020 that is eligible either within the pre-existing guidance on output eligibility or under the provision for delayed outputs – see paragraph 29. Where an output is made publicly available, or is eligible under the delayed outputs provision, after 31 July 2020, an institution may optionally submit it and remove the REF6a form for the staff member to whom the output is attributed.

<sup>2</sup> As a reminder, REF6a reductions may be made on the basis of absence from work due to working part-time, where this has had an exceptional effect on ability to work productively throughout the period 1 January 2014 to 31 July 2020. See paragraph 179.a., footnote 10, of the 'Guidance on submissions'.

23. As a reminder, institutions may apply **any** new or additional reductions at the point of submission. Any reduction requests that were submitted in March 2020 and that have been recommended for approval (in full or in part) are optional for the institution to apply at the point of submission, and may be amended, added to or removed prior to submission. Institutions must ensure that all reductions applied at the submission deadline, midday 31 March 2021, accurately reflect those circumstances pertaining to submitted staff.

24. Broadly, we would expect institutions' existing processes for staff declaration documented in codes of practice to cover the additional guidance on removing the minimum of one output, with appropriate communication to staff on the additional applicable circumstance. This may affect overall timetables, and further guidance on making changes to codes of practice on this (and any wider) basis is set out further below (paragraphs 76 to 84). An updated staff circumstances declaration form is available on the REF website for institutions to use where it is helpful to do so.

25. As with any new or additional reductions applied at the submission deadline, REF6a reductions that include effects of COVID-19 will be considered during the assessment year. The outcomes of the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel's (EDAP) review will feed directly into the assessment process, so feedback will not be provided back to HEIs.

26. The information returned in REF6a/b for any type of circumstances must be based on verifiable evidence. Where an individual's circumstances in REF6a/b are not considered to meet the relevant criteria for applying reductions, or cannot be verified, any 'missing' outputs will be graded as 'unclassified'. Further information on audit is set out below, paragraphs 85 to 89.

27. Institutions are reminded that it is the responsibility of the HEI to ensure that the personal data in requests is submitted in compliance with current data protection legislation – General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 and the Data Protection Act 2018 – and all other legal obligations.

## **Outputs (REF2)**

### **Delayed outputs**

28. The funding bodies recognise that COVID-19 has had effects on the dissemination of research, and that this has been more marked for some output types, including those produced from practice research and longer-form outputs such as monographs. To take account of such delays to the dissemination of outputs that were previously expected to be in public domain by the end of the REF 2021 publication period (31 December 2020), we have set out a provision for submitting delayed outputs. This provision is intended for use on an exceptional basis, where there was a reasonable expectation that an output would be in the public domain by 31 December 2020.

29. Where the final version of an output is not in the public domain by the end of the publication period, 31 December 2020, an output will remain eligible for submission where:

- a. There is clear evidence that the final version of the output was expected in the public domain by 31 December 2020 (for example, the output was accepted for publication and publication was scheduled or expected by a particular date, or a performance or exhibition had been scheduled).

- b. The appearance of the final version in the public domain has been delayed due to the effects of COVID-19 (such as staff circumstances, and/or external factors, such as cancelled performances or publisher delays).
- c. All other eligibility criteria for outputs are met (see 'Guidance on submissions', paragraphs 205 to 222).

30. This provision does not apply to outputs that are not in the public domain due to delays to completing the research itself, unless there is clear evidence that the expected date of appearance in the public domain was within the publication period.

31. For outputs that are eligible for submission according to paragraph 29, the submitting institution should return the final form of the output that is in the public domain, where this is available by 31 March 2021. Where the output is not yet publicly available, a pre-dissemination version should be returned. While it is recognised that pre-dissemination outputs may not be the finalised version of the output (for example, images in texts may be missing), institutions should ensure the submitted form of an output effectively represents the research and is sufficiently complete to allow assessment against the criteria of originality, significance and rigour. Further guidance on submitting delayed outputs from practice research is available at Annex B.

32. It is the funding bodies' expectation that delayed outputs which are not in the public domain when they are submitted will be made publicly available as soon as it is practicable to do so.

33. Delayed outputs should be identified in the submission system. Further guidance on how the revisions are being incorporated into the submission system software is provided in the document 'Changes to the REF 2021 submission system', available on the REF website [ref.ac.uk](http://ref.ac.uk).

34. HEIs will need to be able to verify the eligibility of delayed outputs in the event of audit. Further guidance on audit is provided below, paragraphs 85 to 89. Outputs determined to be ineligible through audit will be removed from the submission and an unclassified score added to the profile to account for the 'missing' output.

### **Affected output statement**

35. Where a delayed output is submitted that is not yet in the public domain in its final form, an **optional** statement (max. 100 words) may be provided to explain the form of the submitted output to the panels. A statement should only be provided in this circumstance; panels do not expect a statement to be provided for all delayed outputs.

36. The statement should provide factual and verifiable information about the form of the output. For example, a description of the version being submitted, and any particular omissions due to the delay issues encountered, such as images in proofs or a performed realisation of a written composition or theatre piece. This may include an explanation of the submitted form in the context of the original intended piece, where applicable. Annex B provides further guidance on submitting a statement for practice research outputs.

37. The statement is **not** intended to demonstrate the submitted output's eligibility under the delayed outputs provision. Eligibility under this provision will be verified in the event of audit (see paragraphs 85 to 89). Statements should not, therefore, contain information about the detailed reasons for delays, including any sensitive personal data.



38. Where submitted, the affected output statement will provide contextual information to the assessing sub-panel, which will be used to support the assessment of the submitted output in accordance with the criteria of originality, significance and rigour. Where submitted in their UOAs, the main and sub-panels will incorporate examples of the affected output statement in the calibration exercise to ensure consistency in the assessment approach.

39. Affected output statements should be submitted through the submission system. Further guidance on how the revisions are being incorporated into the submission system software is provided in the document 'Changes to the REF 2021 submission system'.

40. In accordance with the principle of transparency, we intend to publish affected output statements in summer 2022, along with the wider publication of those parts of submissions that contain factual data and textual information about research activity.

### **Open access**

41. Where it has not been possible for an output that is in scope (as defined at paragraph 223 of the 'Guidance on submissions') of the open access requirements to meet these requirements due to COVID-19, the institution may apply the 'other exception'. This exception is described at paragraph 255.a. of the 'Guidance on submissions'. This includes effects due to individual circumstances (such as ill health, caring responsibilities); other personal circumstances related to COVID-19 (such as furloughed staff, health-related or clinical staff diverted to frontline services, staff resource diverted to other priority areas within the HEI in response to COVID-19); and/or external factors related to COVID-19.

42. HEIs should ensure they are able to verify the use of this exception in the event of audit. As set out in the 'Audit guidance', evidence may be requested at the level of individual outputs in relation to the compliance or exception status of a submitted output. Further guidance on audit is provided below, paragraphs 85 to 89.

43. The number of 'other exceptions' applied to outputs that were made publicly available in the calendar year 2020 (or later, if submitted under the 'delayed outputs' provision) will not be included in the risk identification process for open access compliance. This means that use of the 'other exception' for outputs made publicly available in 2020 will not affect the risk score, irrespective of the reason for its use, or how many times it is used. As noted in paragraph 42, HEIs should ensure they are able to verify the use of this exception in the event of audit. Details of the risk identification process are described in the 'Audit guidance' (paragraphs 46 to 49).

### **Pending outputs**

44. The original guidance made provision for the submission of outputs due for publication between the submission deadline (previously 27 November 2020) and the end of the publication period (31 December 2020).

45. The revised submission deadline of 31 March 2021 falls after the end of the publication period, which remains 31 December 2020 (with an exception for delayed outputs as outlined above, paragraphs 28 to 34). Therefore, this provision is no longer required and the associated guidance for pending outputs no longer applies.

## Impact (REF3)

### Assessment period

46. The assessment period for impact has been extended to 31 December 2020. This means that submitted impact case studies (REF3) can describe impacts occurring in the period 1 August 2013 to 31 December 2020.

47. The purpose of this extension is to support submissions affected by, or focusing on the current response to, COVID-19. While all case studies may report up to the extended deadline, it is **not a requirement** for any case study (including affected case studies) to report up to this date. The funding bodies and the panels neither expect nor require that all case studies report up to the end of the extended assessment period.

48. Institutions should not consider it necessary to amend existing case studies to report up to the end of the period where the case study has not been affected by or focused on COVID-19, and particularly where additional activity or evidence from the extended period would not make a material difference to the case. Case studies reporting up to the previous deadline of 31 July 2020 will be assessed on an equal footing with those reporting up to the 31 December 2020.

### Underpinning research

49. The period for the underpinning research remains as 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020. Where the final version of an output has been delayed due to COVID-19, and is therefore not in the public domain by the end of this period, it may be listed as an underpinning research reference in accordance with the provisions in place for the submission of delayed outputs in REF2 (see paragraphs 28 to 34).

50. Where a delayed output is listed in the research references section of an impact case study, institutions should ensure it is clearly identified as a delayed output – for example, by denoting this in square brackets after the reference: [delayed output].

51. All outputs cited as references to the research in impact case studies must be capable of being made available to panels.

52. HEIs will need to be able to verify that any delayed outputs listed as underpinning research are included in accordance with the provisions at paragraph 29. Further guidance on audit is provided below, paragraphs 85 to 89.

### Affected case study statement

53. Where contextual information is required for the panel to understand aspects of a case study that has been significantly affected by COVID-19, an **optional** statement (max. 100 words) may be provided to explain the disruption to impact activities and / or the collection of key corroborating evidence.

54. A statement should **only** be provided where contextual information is required for the panel to understand aspects of the submitted case study, that would not typically fit in the existing narrative of the case study template. For example, where a central source of corroborating evidence has been affected, and/or where cancelled activities / events have significantly changed key aspects of the case study.

55. The statement should provide factual and verifiable information about the disruption experienced and the effect on the presented case study. The statement may also outline how the unit responded to these issues, where this is not part of the existing narrative. To support institutions in providing the intended type and detail of information, we have developed some illustrative examples at Annex C. The examples are not intended to be exhaustive
56. Statements do not need to explain whether or not the case study is reporting impact in the extended assessment period. A statement may be provided irrespective of whether or not the case study reports impact in the extended assessment period.
57. In general, we would not expect the statements to contain sensitive personal data. However, recognising that some information in relation to the effects of COVID-19 on staff and/or wider individuals could be referenced, there will be a route available to mark the information as not for publication (see paragraph 61).
58. Where submitted, the affected case study statement will provide contextual information to the sub-panel, to support the assessment of the submitted case study. The assessment will focus on the impact achieved during the assessment period; it will not take account of potential impact. Where submitted in their UOAs, the main and sub-panels will incorporate examples of the affected case study statement in the calibration exercise to ensure consistency in the assessment approach.
59. Affected case study statements should be provided through the submission system, rather than being included in the case study template. Further guidance on how the revisions are being incorporated into the submission system software is provided in the document 'Changes to the REF 2021 submission system'.
60. In accordance with the principle of transparency, we intend to publish affected case study statements in summer 2022, along with the wider publication of those parts of submissions that contain factual data and textual information about research activity. An exception to this is described below (paragraph 61). The statements will not be included in the impact case study database (as described at paragraph 40 of the 'Guidance on submissions').
61. Affected case study statements may be excluded from publication where their publication is likely to cause harm to an individual or organisation. Where this is the case, the institution can identify the statement as 'not for publication' at the point of submission.
62. Information included in affected case study statements should be capable of verification. Further guidance on audit is provided below, paragraphs 85 to 89.

## **Environment (REF4a/b/c, REF5a/b)**

### **Institutional-level statement (REF5a): COVID-19 annex**

63. This section describes the information that submitting institutions should provide as an annex to the institutional-level environment statement, in relation to COVID-19 and the environment for research and impact.
64. The main and sub-panels understand the significant effects that COVID-19 has had – and continues to have – on environments for supporting research and enabling impact within HEIs. These effects are recognised as being diverse, and as affecting different institutions in different ways. The panels understand there will have been effects to the

research programmes in operation within institutions, with substantial investment and activity diverted to COVID-19 research for some institutions, and likely delays across the board to research involving large experiments, access to laboratory or other on-site facilities and/or equipment, human participants, international travel, international and/or industry partnerships, and more besides. There is recognition that staff and students may have been greatly affected, particularly those who have caring responsibilities and/or are in a more vulnerable group. The panels acknowledge that there may have been significant changes to research income in the period since March 2020, and that there have been widespread delays to doctoral degree completions. Furthermore, they recognise the scale of, and uncertainty created by, the post-COVID challenge ahead. In addition to these factors, the panels understand that the process of preparing submissions itself will have been affected by the resourcing pressures resulting from COVID-19 for both academic and support staff.

65. These factors are likely to mean that an institution's research environment at the end of the assessment period looks quite different from both the environment in place earlier in the period and from the institution's expectations or plans for it in the future.

66. Institutions are invited to describe the particular changes affecting their environment as a result of COVID-19 and how the institution has responded, in the final part of the assessment period. For example, this could refer to the specific support provided for staff in protected groups, diversion of key resources or facilities to COVID-19, and/or significant income changes due to the pausing or commencement of major programmes. This information (max. 500 words) will stand as an annex to the institutional-level environment statement, which will ensure an institution provides only once in the overall submission information about the effects at the institution level, without needing to duplicate this across unit-level templates. Institutions are advised that the word limit is an upper limit, not a minimum requirement.

67. For clarity, where it pertains to the assessment period for the environment, a submitting unit can include in the existing REF5b template details about the effects of and/or response to COVID-19 as appropriate to the wider evidence it is setting out. However, where included, such details are not expected to comprise a significant proportion of the evidence presented. Institutions are reminded that for the main part, the panels are seeking evidence about the unit-level environment for supporting research and enabling impact in relation to the assessment period overall.

68. The COVID-19 annex will provide context to the sub-panels in their assessment of the unit-level templates, as part of their wider use of the information provided in the institutional-level statement to inform and contextualise their assessment of the relevant sections of the unit-level template. In the case of joint submissions, each HEI's COVID-19 annex will be provided to the sub-panel as part of the REF5a statement.

69. As with the wider institutional-level statement, the COVID-19 annex will not be separately scored or assessed by the sub-panels. In addition, the panels wish to make clear that a 'no detriment' approach will be used with regard to the COVID-19 annex, to emphasise that the information will not negatively inform the panel's assessment of the unit template.

70. The annex should be submitted directly through the submission system, rather than included in the REF5a template. Further guidance on how the revisions are being incorporated into the submission system software is provided in the document 'Changes to the REF 2021 submission system'.

71. In accordance with the principle of transparency, we intend to publish the COVID-19 annex in summer 2022, along with the wider publication of those parts of submissions that contain factual data and textual information about research activity. Where an institutional-level environment statement (REF5a) is identified as requiring redaction, a redacted version of the COVID-19 annex may also be provided, where necessary. A redacted version must be provided through the submission system by 1 June 2021.

### **Guidance on addressing future strategy in environment narratives**

72. In applying the criteria in assessing the environment, the sub-panels will consider the evidence presented in each section of the unit-level template across the assessment period overall. That is, the period from 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020. This approach includes application of the criterion 'sustainability', for which the panels will consider all the evidence provided in assessing the unit's contribution to sustainability. It is important to underline that any future plans described will be considered in terms of their reasonableness as plans at the end of the environment assessment period (31 July 2020), in the wider assessment of a unit's contribution to sustainability. This assessment will not seek to evaluate the realisation of plans after the end of the assessment period.

73. The main and sub-panels recognise that forward planning within institutions, including at unit level, may be significantly affected by the impact of COVID-19. It is important to underline that evidence in relation to future strategy in the environment narratives is not expected to be extensive. The main part of the narrative, including in Section 1 of REF5b, should focus on the assessment period.

74. To support institutions to adapt as necessary the provision of evidence in relation to future strategy, the following guidance is provided:

- a. As at the end of the assessment period (31 July 2020), describe the current principles that are informing, or are intended to inform, strategy for the environment in the immediate and next period. This could include, as appropriate, identification of key risks or concerns and plans for addressing these.
- b. The description may be in relation to how any existing strategies for the future are being adapted or revised, or may be standalone, in place of these.
- c. It is acknowledged that such principles are unlikely to be fully developed, and are anticipated to reflect a working position, based on the available information and wider context at that point in time (31 July 2020).

75. In assessing the environment element of submissions, the panels wish to emphasise that they will assess vitality and sustainability in terms appropriate to the scale and diversity of the research activity the submitting unit supports, and as appropriate for its subject area(s).

### **Codes of practice**

76. Where the delay to the REF due to COVID-19 has affected the timescales for running processes set out in codes of practice, HEIs may run these retrospectively. For example, HEIs may apply their processes after 31 July 2020 for identifying whether staff had significant responsibility for research on the census date or were determined to be independent researchers.

77. Where an HEI needs to make amendments to their approved code of practice due to COVID-19, they must follow the existing processes for making minor and major changes (as appropriate), which are outlined below, in paragraphs 80 to 82.

78. Institutions should follow the process for minor changes where timetables have been wholly shifted to account for delays due to COVID-19 **and all** of the following also apply:

- a. The spacing of milestones within the timetable have not changed.
- b. The revised timing will allow processes to be concluded (including appeals process) in advance of the submission deadline.
- c. The changes will be communicated to all relevant staff with ample time before final submission decisions are made.

79. Any changes made to procedures (including addition of new annexes), substantive changes to the terms of reference of a committee, timetables (other than the exception detailed in paragraph 78) and so on, will be considered major changes to the content of a code of practice and will require the procedure for major changes to be followed.

### **Process for minor changes to a code of practice**

80. For minor changes to a code of practice, for example a change in an individual's membership of a committee, HEIs should send by email to [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) the revised code with visibly tracked changes. Institutions should contact [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) if they require any clarification on whether a change constitutes a minor or major one.

### **Process for major changes to a code of practice**

81. If an HEI identifies an exceptional need to make significant changes to the content of its code of practice after it has been approved by the funding body, the HEI must provide a revised code of practice to the REF team, along with a covering letter from the head of institution. This letter should:

- a. Outline how the code has been amended and the reason for the amendment.
- b. Confirm that the changes have not reduced the extent to which the code adheres to the published guidance.
- c. Provide details of how the institution will communicate the changes to all relevant staff with ample time before final submission decisions are made.

82. The letter and revised code should be sent by email to [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk).

### **Publication of codes of practice and collection of final documents**

83. All submitted and approved codes of practice will be published in autumn 2020. We will shortly notify REF contacts about the timeframe for submitting any changes to codes in relation to the revisions to ensure these are included in published versions.

84. Final versions of codes of practice, equality impact assessments and staff circumstances reports will be collected from all submitting institutions by 30 July 2021, for publication along with the submissions in 2022.

## Audit

85. All information provided by HEIs in submissions to REF 2021, including as part of the revised guidance covered in this document, must be capable of verification. This is to give assurance that the submitted data are accurate and reliable. This means that institutions will need to ensure they satisfy themselves of the accuracy of submitted information, and maintain accurate records that would enable them to verify it if requested through audit.

86. This section sets out the approach to data verification for the revised guidance, including the types of evidence that may be appropriate for the differing requirements. A revised audit timetable for REF 2021 is provided at Annex D.

87. We will undertake data verification of information submitted in accordance with the revised guidance as follows:

- a. REF team audit: information submitted on staff (including staff eligibility and removing the minimum of one) and outputs (including timeframe eligibility and open access compliance) will be included in the existing audit approaches for these aspects, as set out in the 'Audit guidance'. Where outputs and impact case studies are identified for audit as part of our existing approach, and are submitted with affected output or case study statements, we will seek to verify information provided in the statements alongside wider data verification of the output or case study.
- b. Panel-instigated audit: sub-panels may instigate audits to verify specific information relating to any aspect of a submission. This includes information submitted in accordance with the revised guidance. In line with our existing approach of verifying information in REF5a on the basis of panel-instigated audit, we may seek to verify information included in the COVID-19 annex to REF5a.

88. We expect there will be differing types of evidence relating to information submitted under the revised guidance. In line with the wider REF data verification process, we will apply a proportionate approach and will consider evidence on a fair and reasonable basis, the aim being to obtain sufficient evidence to verify the data that are being audited.

89. In the event of audit for any information submitted under the revised guidance, we will ask the submitting institution to verify it by setting out how it assured itself that the information was accurate, and what evidence it consulted. Examples of appropriate forms of evidence for the different categories of information are set out below:

- a. For staff circumstances that include special category personal data (including ill-health and caring responsibilities), the audit will only require evidence of staff self-declaration. This is in line with the wider approach to verifying special category personal data.
- b. For wider personal circumstances, including changes to contracts or job roles (such as furloughed staff, staff diverted to frontline service roles or priority areas within the institution in response to COVID-19), appropriate evidence that the HEI might have consulted could include HR records confirming contract amendments, central or departmental records confirming reprioritised activity relating to COVID-19 (this is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list of examples).

- c. Where there are external effects on aspects of submissions due to COVID-19, such as delays to publications, cancelled events or activities, restricted access to buildings or facilities, and so on, appropriate evidence that the HEI might have consulted could include correspondence from the relevant third party about delays, cancellations or access issues, or evidence as to why correspondence could not be obtained (for example, where an organisation may have paused activity or closed). This is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list of examples.
- d. Regarding clear evidence that an output was expected to be in the public domain by the 31 December 2020, appropriate forms the HEI might have consulted could include publishing contracts, correspondence or other suitable evidence confirming the expected date of appearance. Further guidance on evidencing this for practice research is included in Annex B.



## Annex A Timetable

31 July 2020	Exercise recommences; census date for staff; end of assessment period for the environment for supporting research and enabling impact, and data about research income and research doctoral degrees awarded
W/c 14 September 2020	Outcomes of REF6a/b requests submitted in March 2020 provided to institutions
Autumn 2020	Appointment of additional members and assessors to panels
2 November 2020	Deadline for HEIs to seek agreement to submit impact case studies from research that was undertaken by an absorbed unit before that unit became part of the submitting HEI; deadline for submission of requests for an output reduction in a unit affected by major unforeseen events
By 6 November	Funding bodies' review of contingency arrangements
31 December 2020	End of publication period (cut-off point for publication of research outputs, and for outputs underpinning impact case studies); end of impact assessment period
31 March 2021	Closing date for submissions
April 2021	Anticipated window for delivering physical outputs to the REF team
1 June 2021	Deadline for providing redacted versions of REF3 and REF5a/b templates and corroborating evidence held for impact case studies
30 July 2021	Deadline for submission of staff circumstances report, equalities impact assessment, and final codes of practice
May 2021 – March 2022	Panels assess submissions
April 2022	Publication of outcomes
Summer 2022	Publication of submissions, panel overview reports and sub-profiles

## Annex B

### Guidance for COVID-affected practice-research outputs

1. As a result of the pandemic, the production or documentation of practice research (including artefacts, installations, performances, compositions, media productions etc.) may have been disrupted through cancelled public engagements, exhibitions, performances, recordings, and so on. Equally facilities, communities or source materials may have been rendered inaccessible by business closure, travel restrictions, social distancing, or individual staff circumstances. In such cases, outputs in which the research can be represented in an alternative form and in accordance with the provisions for delayed outputs set out at paragraphs 28 to 34 in the main text, may be submitted. Such outputs may be supported with an affected output statement (max. 100 words) providing an explanation of its presented form, where the output is not yet in the public domain in its final form.
2. Where the production or documentation of practice research has been disrupted to the extent that the research cannot be effectively represented through an alternative form, it may be better addressed through removing the minimum of one output requirement, where the required conditions apply.
3. Where plans for disseminating practice research have been disrupted (for example, due to inaccessible sites, cancelled public exhibitions, performances or recording; films or games not released; festivals and fairs suspended), outputs may instead be 'effectively shared' for the purposes of REF assessment by placing submitted materials elsewhere, such as in an institutional repository. Where possible, outputs should still be discoverable and searchable. In such cases, an affected output statement (max. 100 words) may be included indicating how the output would have been shared within the assessment period.
4. In both cases any additional statement should offer a factual and verifiable account of the effects on the output of the significant obstacles to its production, documentation or dissemination imposed by COVID-19, and an explanation of the form in which the output is therefore being submitted. Panels will then assess the output submitted in that context. Institutions are reminded that this should not require the inclusion of any sensitive personal data.
5. The sub-panels expect that:
  - This provision will be used exceptionally;
  - In the event of audit, HEIs will be able to evidence the basis for a reasonable expectation that the output would have been complete and in the public domain by 31 December 2020 had COVID-19 not occurred (for example, website of public performance listing; confirmation from museum/gallery, recording/production company regarding original release date).
6. Sub-panels expecting practice research outputs will develop further subject-specific guidance with examples of how these provisions might apply in their disciplines, to be available from the REF FAQ pages.

## **Annex C**

### **Illustrative examples of affected case study statements**

#### **Example 1**

Planned events with people with dementia, living in care homes, during April-June 2020 were cancelled. Face to face training sessions with carers and nurses in May 2020 were also cancelled, but were rescheduled as online training sessions in November 2020. Corroborating evidence from Memory Aides LTD is unavailable as the company went into administration in June 2020 and staff can no longer be contacted. Corroborating evidence from Sunny Care Home is briefer than intended due to staff at the home focusing on COVID-19.

#### **Example 2**

An interactive exhibition was scheduled at the Tate Modern in April 2020, which was cancelled due to COVID-19. Instead, the exhibition pivoted to an online format during June and July 2020, showcasing 75% of the works intended for the physical exhibition due to website limitations beyond the researchers' control.

## Annex D

### Detailed timetables (audit, citation data)

#### Revised audit timetable for REF 2021

February – August 2020	Audit period for comparison of survey of submission intentions with HESA data
31 March 2021	Closing date for submissions
April – May 2021	Audit period for staff sample data
May 2021	Audit of small unit exception requests
May – October 2021	Audit period for staff circumstances (REF6a/b)
June – July 2021	Audit period for verification of output eligibility; further verification of staff eligibility following data comparison; first audit period for panel-instigated audit queries
August 2021	Internal audit processes
September – November 2021	Audit of open access process for selected HEIs; sample audit of open access status of outputs; raise REF4 queries with HEIs; random sample of impact case studies; random sample of unit-level environment templates
September – December 2021	Second audit period for panel-instigated audit queries

## Revised timetable for publication of citations information for REF 2021

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August 2020	Beginning of SLA-monitored support period for HEIs using citations data within the REF submissions system
September 2020	Contextual data (based on journal category but not UOA) for the submission phase will be available from Research England, for years 2014 to 2019
January 2021	A further release of contextual data (based on journal category but not UOA) for the submission phase will be available from Research England, for years 2014 to 2019
31 March 2021	Closing date for submissions; final day for opening new support queries
April 2021	Contextual data (based on journal category and UOA) for the assessment phase will be available from Research England, for years 2014 to 2019

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