
REF 2019/06

September 2019

Institutional-level environment pilot: supplementary guidance on submissions and panel criteria and working methods

This document sets out the guidance and criteria for the pilot of the standalone assessment of the institutional-level environment statement. The pilot assessment will be undertaken in parallel to the unit level assessment of the environment in REF 2021 and this guidance is supplementary to the 'Guidance on submissions' (REF 2019/01) and the 'Panel criteria and working methods' (REF 2019/02).

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To

Heads of higher education institutions in the UK

Of interest to those responsible for

Research

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Enquiries from staff at UK higher education institutions

Email your institutional REF contact. (These are listed at www.ref.ac.uk under Contact.)

Other enquiries

Gina Reid
tel 0117 931 7392
email info@ref.ac.uk

Executive summary

Purpose

1. This document:
 - sets out the detailed criteria and working methods the REF institutional-level (IL) environment pilot panel ('the panel') will use in undertaking its assessment, and
 - provides supplementary guidance (Annex A) intended to support higher education institutions' (HEIs) development of the institutional-level environment statement.

Key points

2. All HEIs submitting to the REF are required to return a single IL environment statement (REF5a) in addition to an environment template (REF5b) for each submitting unit they are returning to the REF. The IL statement will be appended to each unit-level template submitted by an institution. The REF sub-panels will use the information provided in the IL statement to inform and contextualise their assessment of the relevant sections of the unit-level template.
3. A *separate* pilot will focus on the standalone assessment of the IL environment. The submitted IL statements will be assessed by the panel constituted for this purpose, and this process will run concurrently to the REF 2021 assessment. The panel will apply the same overarching criteria of vitality and sustainability and the same four starred quality levels and level definitions as are applied in assessing unit-level submissions.
4. The supplementary guidance that the panel has provided for HEIs sets out details of information and indicators for inclusion. These are not intended to be prescriptive; institutions may draw on these as relevant to their own context.
5. The panel will be wholly independent of the work of the REF main and sub-panels, and will be subject to the same requirements for managing conflicts of interest and confidentiality as all other REF panels.

Action

6. This document is for information and to guide institutions in preparing and collecting data for inclusion in REF submissions. No action is required by HEIs at this stage.

Further information

7. For further information about the REF see www.ref.ac.uk.
8. Staff at UK HEIs should direct any queries to their institutional REF contact. Contact details for each institution are listed at www.ref.ac.uk, under Contact.
9. Other enquiries should be addressed to info@ref.ac.uk.

Background

10. A key recommendation of the independent review of REF 2014, led by Lord Stern in 2016, was the introduction of an institutional-level (IL) submission describing the institution's strategy and support for the research environment. This recommendation aimed to reduce duplication across unit-level submissions, enable the accurate representation of aspects of an institution's environment that reflect institutional-level activity, and capture institution-wide strategic objectives and cross-cutting structures and initiatives.

11. Following consultation in 2017, the funding bodies set out their decision to formalise the inclusion of IL information at the unit level, and to pilot the *standalone assessment* of the IL environment, drawing on the submitted information. The outcomes from the pilot exercise will inform the inclusion of a discrete IL environment submission in future REF exercises.

Institutional-level submissions in REF 2021

12. The submission requirements for REF 2021 are set out in the 'Guidance on submissions' (REF 2019/01). HEIs are required to submit an environment template (REF5b) for each submitting unit they are returning to the REF, setting out the unit's environment for research and enabling impact. For REF 2021, HEIs are also required to submit an institutional-level environment statement setting out the institution's strategy and resources to support research and enable impact during the assessment period. **For clarity, the submission of the institutional-level statement (REF5a) in REF 2021 is not a pilot activity.** The IL statement will be appended to each unit-level template (REF5b) submitted by an institution. The sub-panels will use the information provided in the IL statement to inform and contextualise their assessment of the relevant sections of the unit-level template. The IL statement **will not be separately assessed or separately scored** by the sub-panels.

Institutional-level submissions in the pilot

13. The separate pilot will focus on the standalone assessment of the IL environment. The submitted IL statements will be assessed by the environment pilot panel constituted for this purpose, and will run concurrently to the REF 2021 assessment. The REF IL environment pilot panel ("the panel") will apply the same overarching criteria of vitality and sustainability and the same four starred quality levels and level definitions as are applied in assessing unit-level submissions. This will aid comparability, consistency and the evaluation of the pilot and will be used to support the panel's recommendations on whether and how to include a discrete IL assessment in future exercises. The pilot IL assessment outcomes **will not be included in the outcomes for REF 2021.**

Pilot panel

14. The panel has been established to undertake the pilot assessment of IL environment submissions for REF 2021 and to provide advice to the REF team and the UK higher education funding bodies on the feasibility, benefits and drawbacks of a standalone IL assessment, to inform whether and how to include this element in future exercises.

15. The panel will deliver the following objectives:
- a. To develop the criteria and working methods of the panel for the pilot assessment of the IL environment submissions, in dialogue with the sector.
 - b. To contribute to REF engagement with the research community by engaging with stakeholders and main and sub-panel members.
 - c. To calibrate assessment standards and assess the IL environment submissions for each of the HEIs submitting to the REF.
 - d. To produce the final report on the work of the panel, identifying advice and recommendations for the inclusion of IL environment submissions in future REF exercises.
 - e. To contribute to the evaluation of the pilot assessment, which will address feasibility, robustness of panel criteria and assessment, and HEI burden and perceptions.
16. The chair and members of the panel will undertake an ambassadorial role to explain and promote the measures taken to develop assessment of the institutional environment. Membership of the pilot panel can be found on the REF website: <http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/institutional-level-environment-pilot-panel/>
17. Following the publication of the draft IL guidance and criteria in April 2019, a series of consultation workshops were undertaken to engage with and get feedback from institutions on the proposed approach. These events enabled the panel to identify sector concerns and areas for clarification which are reflected in the final guidance and criteria.
18. A core principle the panel wishes to emphasise is that its assessment will be criteria based, reviewing each submission against the stated criteria. The panel will judge each submission on its merits, contextualised appropriately to the nature of the institution. The panel's assessment will not be relative, and will not use or refer to any subgroupings of institutions.

Purpose of this document

19. In January 2019, the four funding bodies published the 'Guidance on submissions' (REF2019/01¹) and 'Panel criteria and working methods' (REF2019/02²). These documents together describe comprehensively the data required in submissions, and how the REF 2021 main and sub-panels will use the data in their assessments. This includes the high-level requirements and submission template for the IL environment statement (REF5a). A summary of these requirements is provided at paragraph 21 for reference.
20. This document sets out the detailed criteria and working methods the panel will use in undertaking its assessment. It also provides supplementary guidance (Annex A) intended to support HEIs' development of the IL environment statement, setting out details of information and indicators for inclusion. These are not intended to be prescriptive; institutions may draw on these as relevant to their own context.

1. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/guidance-on-submissions-201901/>
2. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/panel-criteria-and-working-methods-201902/>

REF5a submission requirements

21. The following information is required in the IL environment statement (REF5a):

- a. Context and mission: an overview of the size, structure, and mission of the institution.
- b. Strategy: the institution's strategy for research and enabling impact (including research integrity, open research, considerations of equality and diversity, and structures to support interdisciplinary research, where applicable) during the assessment period and for the next five-year period.
- c. People: the institution's staffing strategy, support and training of research students, and building on the information provided in codes of practice, evidence about how equality and diversity in research careers is supported and promoted across the institution.
- d. Income, infrastructure and facilities: the institutional-level resources and facilities available to support research. This should include mechanisms for supporting the reproducibility of research as appropriate to the research focus of the HEI, and to facilitate its impact.

22. As set out in paragraph 13 above, the REF5a statements will be reviewed by the pilot assessment panel. The information provided in the IL statement will also be used by the REF sub-panels in order to inform and contextualise their assessment of the relevant sections of the unit-level template. The IL statement will be appended to each unit-level statement (REF5b) submitted by an institution, which the sub-panels will review in undertaking their assessment of the research environment. Therefore, as set out in the 'Panel criteria', submitting units should not repeat material covered in REF5a in REF5b and should cross-refer between the statements, where appropriate. The IL statement will not be separately assessed or separately scored by the sub-panels.

23. As set out in the 'Guidance on submissions', small and specialist institutions that will make a submission in one UOA only will not be required to provide a REF5a statement but may choose to submit one where this is the most appropriate way of representing the institution's research environment. The pilot panel encourage these institutions to submit an IL statement, but wish to highlight that there will be no advantage or disadvantage to an institution in the pilot assessment whichever approach they choose. Where an HEI does not provide a REF5a statement, the panel will review the submitted REF5b template. In such cases, institutions should ensure that sufficient information is provided in the REF5b template about the institution's context and should be guided by the supplementary guidance provided at Annex A of this document. Additionally, where there is any distinction between the research and impact strategies, policies, facilities and resources between the institution and the submitting unit, this should be clearly identified in the REF5b template.

Criteria for assessment of the IL environment

24. The panel will assess IL submissions according to the criteria of 'vitality' and 'sustainability'. The panel has set out below how it will interpret these criteria in the assessment:

- a. **Vitality:** will be understood as the extent to which the institution promotes and facilitates a thriving, inclusive and collaborative research culture, and enables impact within research units. This should be based on a clearly articulated and overarching strategy for research and enabling its impact across the institution.
- b. **Sustainability:** will be understood as the extent to which the research environment ensures the future health, diversity, wellbeing and wider contribution of the institution and its research units, including investment in people and infrastructure.

Weighting for assessment

25. The panel will evenly weight the following three sections of REF5a for assessment:

- Strategy
- People
- Income, infrastructure and facilities

26. Section one: context and mission will provide background information to support contextual assessment of the other sections and will not be scored.

Data analysis

27. The panel will receive quantitative data relating to the institutional research environment. This will be aggregated from the unit-level information provided in REF4a/b/c and the standard analyses (see 'Guidance on submissions', paragraphs 337-358 and Annex J).

28. The panel is committed to the core REF principle of assessment of excellence wherever it is found, and will not undertake benchmarking or grouping of institutions in the assessment. The panel will undertake *post hoc* analyses of outcomes to identify trends and patterns in the results, in order to inform its recommendations for any future approach.

Environment quality profile

29. The panel will assess the information provided in the IL environment template (REF5a), and consider the environment data within the context of that information. The panel will build up a graduated quality profile by assessing the elements within each submission, using the starred quality levels identified in the 'Guidance on submissions', Annex A. The panel has indicated the weighting that it will attach to each component of the environment statement at paragraph 25, above.

Panel working methods

30. **Working with the main and sub-panels:** In order to ensure that the panel functions, and is seen to function, independently from the formal assessment of REF submissions, there will be no cross-membership with members of the main or sub-panels. The panel chair will meet regularly with the four main panel and the advisory panel (EDAP and IDAP) chairs, prior to and throughout the assessment phase. This approach is to facilitate the coordination of activities and ensure clarity and common understanding of key issues between panels. This will not include information or discussion in relation to individual submission assessments.

31. **Calibration of assessment standards:** In advance of the assessment phase and calibration the panel will incorporate additional international members able to provide a broader and comparative view of relevant standards to inform the panel's assessment. At its first meeting of the assessment phase the panel will undertake a calibration exercise using a sample of IL submissions, to develop a common understanding of the assessment standards and the application of the quality levels. The panel will also review and moderate scoring throughout the assessment phase, to ensure overall consistency.

32. **Assessing submissions:** Each statement will be allocated to a sub-group of three members of the panel for assessment, of whom at least one will have previous REF experience. Research users will advise on a range of submissions, which will inform the calibration and assessment standards to be applied. The pilot panel will examine all the information submitted in the statements, together with the aggregated data and standard analyses. Assessment will be undertaken independently by each panel member who will submit their scores for discussion and agreement of a final profile within a full panel meeting. The panel will agree a score against the assessment criteria using the environment scoring format at Table A4 in Annex A of the 'Guidance on submissions'.

33. During the course of the assessment, the sub-panels and the pilot panel will be asked to draw attention to any data, information and claims they would like the REF team to verify through an audit. These data will be investigated by the REF team (in addition to the REF team auditing a proportion of submitted information from each institution, as described in 'Guidance on submissions', paragraphs 91 to 97).

34. **Integration with unit level assessment:** following the publication of the REF 2021 results in December 2021, the panel will undertake a triangulation exercise with the sub-profiles for the REF5b environment submissions made by each institution. This will inform the panel's assessment of the viability of the IL element, and inform its final recommendations. This means that the panel will complete its assessment in early 2022, after the REF 2021 results are published.

35. The panel will also review a sample of each institution's unit-level environment submissions, to evaluate the extent to which an institution's strategies and practices are reflected and implemented at unit level.

36. **Recording panel decisions:** The panel secretariat will minute details of the procedures followed by the panel, and these will be published after the conclusion of the exercise. The panel will not make or record collective judgements about individuals' contributions to submissions. The panel secretariat will record the panel's collective judgements about the quality profile in respect of each submission.

37. **Managing conflicts of interest:** The panel will observe the arrangements for managing conflicts of interest set out in Annex D of the 'Panel criteria and working methods'.

38. **Confidentiality arrangements:** The panel is bound by the terms of the REF confidentiality arrangements as detailed in Annex E of the 'Panel criteria and working methods'. These arrangements have been put in place to enable the effective management and operation of the REF, and for the protection of panel members.

Feedback, recommendations and publication of results

39. **Pilot recommendations for future assessments:** Following assessment, the panel will publish an evaluative summary of its work including formal recommendations to the funding bodies on the inclusion (or not) of IL environment submissions in future assessment exercises. The report will offer a view on whether assessment at this level is viable and proportionate, and whether it should be taken forward for future exercises. If so, it will set out recommendations for any adjustments to the assessment process identified through the work of the panel. This may include consideration of specific issues highlighted through consultation that pertained to the final guidance as set out in the 'Guidance on submissions', such as the word limits for REF5a.

40. **Feedback to HEIs and publication of results:** The panel will provide individual feedback confidentially to all submitting institutions. This will not include the quality profile but will provide a narrative commentary by the pilot panel on the institution's submission. Feedback will highlight key elements of their submission for comment, including any areas of concern or opportunities for improvement, or where the panel has assessed the institution's approach as notably positive in any respect.

41. The outcomes of the pilot assessment may be aggregated for publication, to support the conclusions of the panel as to whether or not IL assessment is viable. Quality profiles for named individual submissions will not be published. This reflects the purpose of the pilot, which is to consider the viability of assessment at this level; it is therefore inappropriate to provide individual quality profiles while this is under consideration.

Annex A: Supplementary guidance for Institutions in preparing their institutional-level environment statement (REF5a)

42. Institutions should set out in narrative form their submission for each section, addressing (but not limited to) the areas identified in the guidance below, as relevant to the institution. The guidance is not intended to be prescriptive; institutions may draw on the examples provided as relevant to their own context. In providing evidence in the REF5a statement, institutions should draw on supporting quantitative indicators where applicable (see paragraphs 48-50 below), which they believe best articulate their own institutional approach. The information provided through this template should illustrate the impact on the institution's research units achieved through the activities and approaches of the institution centrally.

REF5a, Section 1: Institutional context and mission

43. This section should provide evidence of the size, structure and mission of the institution. Evidence should include (but is not limited to):

- Wider institutional context, including overall size and structure; balance between research, teaching and enterprise activities; local economic and demographic context; mission, affiliations and peer groupings.
- Institutional research focus, disciplinary spread and diversity; institutional history and development and relative maturity of different disciplines.

REF5a, Section 2: Institutional research and impact strategy

44. This section should provide evidence relating to the institution's strategy for research and enabling impact during the assessment period and for the next five-year period. Evidence should be supplemented with supporting data as appropriate, and may include (but is not limited to):

- Achievement of strategic goals for research and impact during the assessment period, and details of future strategic goals for research and impact over the next five years, across the institution.
- How the institution enables and facilitates impact, identifying target communities and interaction with knowledge exchange, and details of the institution's wider contributions to the economy and society.
- Institutional approaches to: creating an open research environment, including open access policies; and engaging with regional and national research priorities.
- How the institution supports: interdisciplinary research; a culture of research integrity; the development of research collaborations, networks and partnership; and engagement with the wider community through research.

REF5a, Section 3: People

45. This section should provide evidence of the institution's staffing strategy, support and training of research students, and building on the information provided in codes of practice, evidence about how equality and diversity in research careers is supported and promoted across the institution. Information may include (but is not limited to):

- Staffing strategy and staff development, including institutional policies and evidence of their implementation for the following: study leave; flexible and/or remote working; staff recruitment and progression; support for staff with caring responsibilities, ill-health or other equality-related circumstances; career pathways for part-time and fixed term staff; supporting staff wellbeing.
- Implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers.
- Early Career Researchers: approach and mechanisms available for the support and career development of early career researchers (including those on fixed-term contracts).
- Research students: support mechanisms for, and the quality of training and supervision of, PGR students.
- Equality and diversity: commitment to equality and diversity in recruitment and support of staff and research students, including strategies, activities and collaborations to support equality and diversity. This may include details of relevant accreditations where held and/or other supporting information. All relevant protected characteristics should be considered.

46. The institution should also demonstrate how it has given due regard to equality and diversity issues in the construction of its REF submissions across its submitting units and how this approach relates to the processes set out in their institution's code of practice.

REF5a, Section 4: Income, infrastructure and facilities

47. This section should provide information about the institutional-level resources and facilities available to support research across the institution, and facilitate its impact. This should include mechanisms for supporting the reproducibility of research as appropriate to the research focus of the HEI. Evidence may include (but is not limited to):

- Institutional strategies and supporting activities for generating research income across research units.
- Infrastructure and facilities supporting research and enabling impact across the institution, including the nature, quality, provision and operation of any specialist research infrastructure and facilities, any major benefits-in-kind, and details of any shared or collaborative use of research infrastructure or major facilities.
- How equality and diversity issues are addressed, in relation to support for acquiring research funding, or accessing scholarly or operational infrastructure.

Indicators for the institutional-level environment:

48. Institutions are encouraged to provide indicators relevant to their institutional context in support of their narrative submission. In particular, institutions are strongly encouraged to consider those indicators recommended by the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics (FFRRM)³. The panel wish to reiterate FFRRM's advice that the narrative for the environment submission has primacy, and that indicators should be used as relevant in order to support and evidence what is set out in the narrative. Institutions should not consider FFRRM's indicators to be mandatory or a check-list for inclusion, and should use indicators relevant to their own context.

49. The panel is interested in evidence of institutional commitment to and progress made in the areas of staff support and equality and diversity considerations, and has identified key indicators it requests institutions to provide in the IL statement: (1) recruitment by age profile; (2) professors and senior staff by protected characteristic (for all characteristics where data are held); (3) gender pay gap (HEIs should refer to the FFRRM's advice for details of this indicator). The panel recognises that information provided at the institution level may "flatten" the data, and also that data in respect of protected characteristics may only be partial.

50. The panel will consider relevant accreditation standards demonstrating institutional commitment to staff support and progression where these are available, as outlined in the FFRRM's advice, for instance: Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter, Stonewall Workplace Equality Index and HR Excellence in Research Award. However, institutions are reminded that these should not be considered mandatory elements for submission. The panel recognise that financial and resource implications for accreditation may be disproportionate for some institutions. The panel's key interest is in the institutional goals, strategic approach and progress, and it invites institutions to provide relevant supporting evidence in these areas.

3. <http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1019/guidance-on-environment-indicators.pdf>

Annex B: Institutional-level environment statement (REF5a) format and word limits

1. Information on format and word limit for the institutional environment statement (REF5a) are set out in Annex F of the 'Guidance on submissions'. They are repeated here for ease of reference.

Format

2. Templates for REF3, REF5a and REF5b will be provided to institutions in Word. Completed templates and case studies must be submitted as PDF documents for the assessment. A Word version of the templates and case studies will also be required. PDF documents must be accessible to screen reading technology (rather than scanned documents). Completed templates must adhere to the following:

- a. Arial font, 11 point (minimum)
- b. single line spacing (minimum)
- c. 2 cm margins (minimum)

3. Completed templates may include formatting (bold or underlined text, headings, lists, and so on), tables and non-text content, so long as the guidance on maximum page/word limits and on minimum font size, line spacing and margin widths set out in this annex are adhered to.

Word Limit

4. The maximum word limit for the institutional environment statement will depend on the total FTE of Category A submitted staff returned across the institution, according to Table F1. Submitting institutions are reminded that this is an upper limit, not a minimum requirement.

Number of Category A submitted staff returned by institution (FTE)	Word limit for environment statement (REF5a)
1 – 99.99	4,000
100 – 499.99	4,500
500 – 999.99	5,000
1000 or more	5,500

Table F1: Word limits for REF5a

Annex C: Feedback from consultation on the institutional-level guidance and criteria

1. Following publication of the draft ILEPP guidance in April 2019, the panel and REF team undertook three consultation events for submitting institutions. There was positive engagement from those attending and the events had wide representation both geographically and by institutional size and type with circa 220 attendees. Feedback was invited on the draft, and attendees were able to seek clarity from panel members. Those attending were also requested to provide a written summary of comments from small group discussion. This annex summarises the feedback provided across the events and written responses.
2. Many of those responding were broadly positive about the opportunity to bring greater focus to institutional activities and how this interacts and impacts with research at unit-level (UL). It was noted that the inclusion of this element may help to drive engagement between institution and unit activities, and to drive central review and communication.
3. There were some reservations about additional burden arising from the requirement for an institutional-level (IL) submission, which was felt may reduce burden in the future but would increase it for this exercise. A number of respondents raised concerns that the guidance had been provided late in the REF cycle, having a direct impact on the work of submissions currently in progress in many institutions. Some felt that the guidance for submissions was too detailed and prescriptive.
4. Many respondents felt the status of the IL submission and the pilot assessment was unclear, and that this needed to be addressed in the guidance. There were also requests for greater clarity about how sub-panels will use the IL submission for the UL environment assessment. The feedback raised concerns about the instruction to avoid duplication and use cross referencing between the IL and UL statements, noting that this may affect readability and flow of both documents. It was noted that units will want to highlight key issues which may lead to duplication, and concerns that this may lead to be penalisation of submissions by the sub-panels.
5. Some concern was raised about whether the approach of the pilot would favour established over newer institutions, and favour large and research intensive institutions over smaller and more specialist ones. Respondents felt it was important that the pilot assessment must be able to recognise improvement from any starting position, and that diversity in the sector needed to be valued. While returning an IL statement will be optional for small and specialist institutions submitting in only one UOA, some respondents felt it was unclear what detriment or advantage there would be in choosing whether or not to submit one.
6. Use of TRAC groupings was a particular point of concern, with no clear benefit seen in clustering prior to assessment. Some felt this appeared to stand in opposition to the core REF principle of recognising excellence wherever it is found. Respondents views were that assessment must be absolute and based on institutional context, and that any clustering should be post hoc, purely for descriptive purposes and based on assessment outcomes.

7. Some issues were raised in relation to use of aggregated REF4 data which may not be comprehensive if not all units are submitted, and may tend towards the mean. The identified indicators outlined in the draft guidance were seen by some as prescriptive and unlikely to be useful because of variations in career trajectories across different disciplines. Some questioned whether they were identified due to availability rather than appropriateness. It was further noted that HESA categorisations may mask relevant detail. Respondents felt it was important that institutions are able to identify and include indicators of significance within their own context.
8. The word limits were seen by some to be restrictive, and it was also suggested that the word limits might better relate to the number of UOAs submitted in than staff headcount. Further guidance was also requested on inclusion of diagrams and infographics within the word count.
9. There was mixed feedback on the weighting applied to the “Context” element of the IL submission, with some feeling that this should not be scored, whilst others considered that this is central to the assessment, and should attract a score as there were elements of strategic reporting included. Institutions were unclear how to report progress from 2014 at this level as this was not included in the previous REF.
10. Respondents felt the feedback from the pilot to institutions should be detailed and meaningful in order to inform future submissions and to help drive improvement. They were in the main keen to receive their own scores from the pilot, noting that this would also support improvement and would provide a benchmark for future REF exercises. However, there was little to no support for wider publication of scores at institution level.



Cyngor Cyllido Addysg
Uwch Cymru
Higher Education Funding
Council for Wales

hefcw



Nicholson House
Lime Kiln Close
Stoke Gifford
Bristol BS34 8SR

tel 0117 931 7392
email info@ref.ac.uk
www.ref.ac.uk
