

30 September 2019

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Dear Vice-chancellor or Principal,

REF 2021: Invitation to submit staff circumstances reduction requests (REF6a/b)

1. This letter invites higher education institutions (HEIs) to submit staff circumstances reduction requests for consideration in advance of the submission deadline. These are requests for reductions (without penalty) to the number of outputs required for a given submitted unit. The advance process will provide HEIs with the opportunity to receive decisions prior to making submissions in REF 2021.
2. Requests should be made by **noon, 6 March 2020** through the REF 2021 submission system using forms REF6a (removing the minimum of one requirement) and REF6b (unit reductions). Requests will be reviewed by the REF Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) and decisions provided to institutions by the 29 May 2020. A full timetable for the process is provided at Annex A.
3. In applying the reductions that have received advance recommendation for approval from EDAP at the submission deadline, institutions must ensure that these reductions still accurately reflect the circumstances pertaining to submitted staff. Where there are changes to the staff included in requests or the nature of their circumstances since the request was made, institutions must update the information in the REF6a/b forms before making their submissions in November 2020. Where new or additional reductions are applied at the submission deadline, these will be reviewed as part of the full assessment process as in previous exercises.

Summary of the staff circumstances policy in REF 2021

4. The 'Guidance on submissions' sets out the rationale and approach to taking account of staff circumstances in REF 2021. This includes a summary of applicable circumstances (paragraphs 160 to 163) and details of the permitted reductions (Annex L). Further information about the approach was provided to the sector in Professor Dianne Berry's [open letter](#) of January 2019. Additional clarifications were outlined in a further [letter to HEIs](#), from Professor Berry and Dr Steven Hill in September 2019.

5. Where a staff member has experienced circumstances that have had an exceptional effect on their on their ability to work productively during the period 1 January 2014 to 31 July 2020, so that they have not been able to produce an eligible output, the requirement to submit a minimum of one output for that staff member may be removed, without penalty, and the total output requirement for the submitting unit reduced by one. Cases may be made where the circumstances set out in the 'Guidance on submissions' (paragraph 179) apply, or if they do not apply where the individual's circumstances are deemed to have resulted in a similar impact.

6. Where there are a high proportion of staff in a submitting unit whose circumstances have affected productivity during the assessment period, so that the size of the total output pool has been disproportionately affected, a request may be made to reduce the number of outputs required for submission by that unit without penalty in the assessment.

7. All institutions participating in REF will have outlined their processes for taking account of staff circumstances in their codes of practice. Institutions must ensure that reduction requests are made in accordance with codes of practice and the REF guidance.

Review process for reduction requests

8. The detailed information requirements for forms REF6a/b, and information about how to submit requests, are set out at Annex B. Word templates of these forms are attached at Annex C. These are provided for information only. All requests must be made through the REF2021 submission system.

9. All requests submitted by noon, 6 March 2020 will be reviewed by EDAP on a consistent basis. EDAP may take advice on any discipline-related issues in connection with submitted requests from the main panel chairs.

10. In the event that insufficient information is provided by institutions to inform EDAP's recommendations on requested reductions, submitting institutions will be asked to provide additional detail. This process will not seek to verify the accuracy of the submitted data (i.e. verify that the cited circumstances took place). Instead, it will seek to ensure the panel has sufficient information about the effect of the circumstances on research productivity, including (where applicable) to confirm the correct application of the tariffs. Data accuracy

will be considered through the existing data verification process in place for REF 2021 (see below, paragraphs 21 to 23).

11. EDAP's recommendations on requested reductions will be provided to institutions by 29 May 2020, through the REF2021 submission system. This will include details of the recommendations made in relation to the individual elements of unit reduction requests, as well as on requests overall. A written explanation will be provided where a request is not accepted, whether in full or in part.

Appeals

12. HEIs may appeal the recommendations on the basis of concerns about the processes followed in determining reductions or incorrect application of guidance. Appeals cannot be made against the expert judgement of EDAP. Appeals may only be made on behalf of the submitting HEI, rather than an individual or other organisation. Appeals may be made from the point that HEIs receive the recommendations until 15 June 2020. These should be submitted via the REF team to info@ref.ac.uk.

13. If the appeal meets the grounds but contains insufficient information, HEIs will have five working days to provide further information. Once this information is received, the appeal will be passed to the appeals panel. Comment will be invited from the EDAP chair on all appeals being taken forward.

14. The appeals panel will comprise the REF Steering Group. The membership of this group is available on the REF website, under 'About'. All appeals will be considered by the REF census date, 31 July 2020. The decision of the appeals panel is final.

Submitting REF6a/b forms at the submission deadline

15. The recommendations on advance requests will set out a maximum reduction that may be applied without penalty for the submitting unit, in relation to the staff included in the request. These reductions are optional for the institution to apply at the point of submission, and may be amended, added to or removed prior to submission, as described below. Institutions must ensure that any reductions that are applied at the submission deadline, noon 27 November 2020, accurately reflect those circumstances pertaining to submitted staff.

16. Following the conclusion of the advance review process, the data submitted in requests will be updated in the REF6a/b forms in the submission system to include only those that have been recommended for approval, including any adjusted reductions. Institutions may then edit the REF6a/b forms after the 31 July 2020 to include any amendments, additions or removals.

17. Where an institution does not take up the maximum reduction for staff included in advance requests, the changes will not be reviewed again by EDAP. Amendments to the forms at the submission deadline **must** be made in the following cases:

- a. Staff included in reduction request(s) in March 2020, who are not included in the submission as Category A submitted staff, must be removed from the REF6a/b forms.
- b. Where Category A submitted staff were included in the reduction request(s), and since the request was made their circumstances have changed so that a lower or no reduction would apply, HEIs must update the information in REF6a/b so that it accurately reflects the circumstances that have taken place. In the case of requests to remove the minimum of one requirement, this would include where the staff member has an eligible output made publicly available between the 6 March and the census date (31 July 2020)¹.

18. HEIs may optionally apply any new or additional reductions in forms REF6a/b at the point of submission, including in (but not limited to) the following cases:

- a. Where Category A submitted staff were already employed in the unit by the 6 March 2020 and have had new applicable circumstances arising between 6 March and 31 July 2020 that meet the guidance for a permitted reduction; or, if the staff member was already included in the request, new additional circumstances have arisen that meet the guidance for a greater reduction than was originally applied.
- b. Where Category A submitted staff with applicable circumstances were employed as Category A eligible in the unit on or after 6 March 2020.
- c. Where changes in the staff profile mean that the effect of declared circumstances on a submitting unit is now considered to be disproportionate, and a unit reduction is newly applied in REF6b.

19. As any new or additional reductions will be applied at the submission deadline, they will therefore be considered during the assessment year. This is aside from the exception described at paragraph 20. The outcomes of EDAP's review will feed directly into the assessment process, so feedback will not be provided back to HEIs.

20. Where an individual is employed in a submitting unit on or after 6 March 2020 (and before or on 31 July 2020), for whom an advance request to remove the minimum of one requirement was made and recommended for approval, the reduction may be applied by the new unit (whether in the same or a different HEI). In this case, the new unit should include a REF6a form for the staff member at the point of submission, and indicate in the supporting information that a recommendation to accept the reduction has previously been provided. The applied reduction will not be reviewed again by EDAP. However, the information

¹ Where the output is made publicly available after the 31 July 2020, an institution may optionally submit it and remove the REF6a form for the staff member to whom the output is attributed.

included will be subject to audit, so the submitting HEI will need to assure itself of the accuracy of the submitted information.

Data verification

21. As with all information provided by HEIs in submissions to REF 2021, the information submitted in REF6a/b must be capable of verification.
22. Data verification will be undertaken on the information included in REF6a/b at the point of submission in November 2020, including on the information provided in requests made in March that are taken up at the point of submission, and any new or updated cases. Audit queries may be raised with HEIs between January and June 2021. Paragraphs 85 to 96 of the 'Audit guidance' (REF 2019/04) provide further details about audit in relation to REF6a/b.
23. Where an individual's circumstances in REF6a/b cannot be verified, any 'missing' outputs will be graded as 'unclassified'.

Action required

24. All HEIs seeking advance consideration of output reductions on the basis of staff circumstances will need to submit requests by noon, 6 March 2020 using the online REF2021 submission system.
25. HEIs must ensure the information included in REF6a/b forms at the point of submission to REF 2021 is accurate. Where staff have left, or their circumstances have changed so that a lower or no reduction would apply, the HEI must update the REF6a/b forms prior to submission in November. HEIs may optionally apply additional or new reductions at the point of submission. Additional reductions will be reviewed during the assessment year.
26. HEIs must ensure that the proposed reduction would not result in a smaller total output requirement than the number of Category A submitted staff in the unit for whom a minimum of one output is required.

Yours sincerely,



Kim Hackett
REF Director

Annex A: reduction requests timetable

October 2019	Webinar and worked examples related to staff circumstances published
Noon, 6 March 2020	Deadline for submitting reduction requests for staff circumstances
29 May 2020	EDAP's recommendations on advance requests provided to HEIs
15 June 2020	Deadline for submitting appeals regarding recommendations
By 31 July 2020	Outcome of appeals communicated to HEIs
After 31 July 2020	REF6a/b forms updated and re-opened for editing
Noon, 27 November 2020	Submission deadline

Annex B: Information requirements and submission process

1. The information submitted in REF6a/b should be provided in a way that minimises the use of identifying information (beyond provision of the HESA staff identifier). For example, institutions should not use staff members' names in any of the supporting information provided.
2. The panel do not require detailed information to be provided in the REF6a/b forms about the nature of the circumstances beyond the brief outline specified for each form below. Rather, the focus should be upon describing the effect of the circumstances upon the staff member's ability to research productively. To support institutions in providing an appropriate level of detail, the REF team will provide some illustrative examples. We will also develop a webinar for institutions on making reduction requests. These materials will be available by the end of October 2019.

Removing the minimum of one requirement (REF6a)

3. The following data are required in requests to remove the minimum of one (REF6a):
 - a. HESA staff identifier: this is to enable submission system validation and for verification purposes.
 - b. Circumstance type: a flag to indicate which of the circumstances listed in paragraph 160 of the 'Guidance on submissions' apply. All applicable circumstances should be selected.
 - c. Supporting information (max 200 words), including:
 - i. An outline of the circumstances and the time period in which they occurred.
 - This should also include which of the circumstances cases set out at paragraph 179a. to c. of the 'Guidance on submissions' apply. Where this includes circumstances equivalent to absence, briefly outline how the HEI determined that the circumstances were equivalent to 46 months absence or more.
 - If none of the cases at 179a. to c. apply, but the circumstances are deemed to have resulted in a similar impact, provide a brief description of what the circumstances were and how the HEI deemed the impact to have been similar.
 - ii. A description of how the circumstances affected the staff member's ability to produce an eligible output in the period.
4. Where the request is recommended for approval, and the circumstances as described still accurately apply, the staff member may be returned with no outputs attributed to them in the submission. The total outputs required by the unit will be reduced by one.

Unit reduction request (REF6b):

5. Reductions arising from the circumstances of individual staff should be determined according to the tables and guidance in Annex L, up to a reduction of 1.5 outputs per staff member affected.
6. The following data are required in unit reduction requests (REF6b):
 - a. For each staff member included in the request with defined circumstances:
 - i. HESA staff identifier: this is to enable submission system validation and for verification purposes.
 - ii. Circumstance type: the circumstance(s) listed at paragraph 160a. to d. of the 'Guidance on submissions' that apply, and (where applicable) information on which tariff band(s) applies. Further details on combining circumstances is set out below (paragraph 9 to 12).
 - b. For each staff member included in the request with circumstances requiring a judgement:
 - i. HESA staff identifier: this is to enable submission system validation and for verification purposes.
 - ii. Circumstance type: this should be identified as 'requiring judgement'.
 - iii. Reduction proposed: the number of outputs proposed for reduction on the basis of the circumstances.
 - iv. Supporting information (max 200 words), including:
 - An outline of the circumstances and the time period in which they occurred.
 - A description of how the circumstances affected the staff member's ability to research productively, including how the HEI determined an appropriate reduction, applying the reductions set out in Table L2 by analogy.
 - c. Rationale for unit reduction (max 300 words): a description of the rationale for the unit reduction, including information on why the HEI considered the effect to be disproportionate and how it determined this, in accordance with the HEI's code of practice and the REF guidance.
7. The requested reduction in REF6b will be the sum of the reductions arising from individual staff with applicable circumstances included in the request.
8. As part-time working is taken account of within the calculation for the overall number of outputs required for the unit (which is determined by multiplying the unit's FTE by 2.5), reduction requests on the basis of part-time working hours should only be made exceptionally. For example, where the FTE of a staff member late in the assessment period does not reflect their average FTE over the period as a whole. Where, exceptionally, a case

for a reduction is being made on this basis, it should be included as circumstances requiring a judgement and the case set out for the specified reduction in the supporting information. In this instance, HEIs may refer to Table L2 of the 'Guidance on submissions' to determine an appropriate reduction. The equivalent 'total months absent' may be calculated by multiplying the number of months worked part-time by the full-time equivalent (FTE) not worked during those months. For example, an individual worked part-time for 30 months at 0.6 FTE. The number of equivalent months absent = $30 \times 0.4 = 12$.

Combining circumstances

9. Where an individual has had a combination of circumstances that have a defined reduction in outputs, these may be accumulated up to the maximum reduction of 1.5 outputs. For each circumstance, the relevant reduction should be applied and added together to calculate the total maximum reduction. In entering details of circumstances, HEIs must ensure only one circumstance is taken into account for any period of time during which they took place simultaneously.

10. If a combination includes a staff member who is an early career researcher and who has also had period of secondment or a career break outside the HE sector, the period of time since 1 January 2014 up until the individual met the definition of an ECR should be calculated in months, and Table L2 should be applied. In this case, 'secondment/career break' should be recorded as the 'circumstance type' in the request form and the applicable tariff selected for the total absence across both (non-overlapping) periods.

11. If a staff member meets the definition of a junior clinical academic and has had any other applicable circumstances, this should be included as circumstances requiring a judgement and the case set out for a further reduction in the supporting information.

12. If a staff member has any other defined circumstance in combination with circumstances requiring a judgement, this should be included as circumstances requiring a judgement with all applicable circumstances described in the supporting information, and details of how the HEI determined an appropriate reduction. For all circumstances requiring a judgement, including in combination with defined circumstances, the institution will need to make a judgement about the effect of the circumstances in terms of the equivalent period of time absent, and apply the reductions as set out in Table L2 by analogy.

Further information

13. As set out in the 'Guidance on submissions', unit reduction requests (REF6b) may include staff for whom a request is submitted to remove the minimum of one (REF6a).

14. At the point of making an advance request, institutions may take account of where an individual's circumstances are ongoing, or are expected to occur by 31 July 2020. This includes in relation to defined reductions, making a judgement on circumstances equivalent

to absence, or removing the minimum requirement. Institutions will need to ensure the information included in REF6a/b is accurate at the submission deadline, as described in the main letter (paragraph 15).

15. The total reduction will be calculated by summing the reductions requested across all REF6a and REF6b forms for the submitting unit. This will sum to an unrounded figure, which will be considered by EDAP. Rounding will be applied in the submission system to ensure a whole number of outputs is deducted from the unit's output requirement.

Annex C: REF6a/b templates

1. The templates included in this annex are provided for information only, to support institutions in preparing the information for submission. Requests **must** be submitted through the online REF2021 submission system, and **must not** be submitted using the templates below.

2. In using these forms, institutions are advised to follow the guidance outlined in Annex B on combining circumstances for REF6b. The submission system will limit the total reduction applying to any one staff member in REF6b to the maximum of 1.5.

REF6a

Complete one for each staff member for whom a request is being made:

HESA staff identifier*:	
Circumstance type*:	<input type="checkbox"/> Early career researcher <input type="checkbox"/> Secondment/Career break <input type="checkbox"/> Family-related leave <input type="checkbox"/> Junior clinical academic <input type="checkbox"/> Requiring judgement
Supporting information*: (max 200 words)	

REF6b

Complete one for each staff member included in the unit request:

HESA staff identifier*:				
Circumstance type*:		(X)		(X)
	Early career researcher		Tariff band:	1-Aug-2016 – 31-Jul-2017
				1-Aug-2017 – 31-Jul-2018
				1-Aug-2018 or later
	Secondment/Career break		Tariff band:	12 – 27 months
			28 – 45 months	

				46 months or more	
	Family-related leave		Tariff band:	1 period of leave	
				2 periods of leave	
				3 or more periods of leave	
	Junior clinical academic				
	Requiring judgement				
<i>Where 'Requiring judgement' is selected only, complete the following:</i>					
Reduction proposed:	0.5 1.0 1.5				
Supporting information*: (max 200 words)					

Complete one for the unit request:

Rationale for unit reduction*: (max 300 words)	
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