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Nominating bodies for REF 2021 panel membership were required to complete a template asking about their organisation and how equality and diversity was supported within this, as well as about how equality and diversity was taken into account in identifying and selecting nominees for REF panels. This document reports on the REF Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel's review of the submitted templates. It is published alongside the report on 'Analysis of REF 2021 panel membership' (2019/07).

# **REF 2021 Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel**

Improving REF Panel  
Representativeness:

Review of Nominating Bodies'  
Equality and Diversity templates

# Improving REF Panel Representativeness: Review of Nominating Bodies' Equality and Diversity templates

## Background

1. Following analysis of the REF 2014 panel membership, the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) recommended that in a future exercise more should be done to identify ways of more effectively mainstreaming equality and diversity considerations among all participants, at all stages of the appointment process. The four UK higher education (HE) funding bodies recognise that diversity of background, perspective, and experience contributes fundamental insight and value to the value of the work of REF panels, and therefore put in place a range of measures to increase the representativeness of panel membership for REF 2021<sup>1</sup>. These measures included a requirement that all organisations wishing to submit nominations for REF panel membership would need to provide information about how equality and diversity issues were taken into account in putting forward nominations.
2. Nominating bodies were required to complete a template (see Annex A) asking about their organisation and how equality and diversity was supported within this, as well as about how equality and diversity was taken into account in identifying and selecting nominees for REF panels. They were also provided with contextual data (see <http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/nompan/Contextual>Data>) to provide a broad indication of the current representation of HE academic staff across age, gender, ethnicity, and disability. The data highlighted where key challenges remain for improving diversity in the academic staff population.
3. Completed templates were assessed by EDAP in spring 2018. The aim of the current report is to provide reflections on the effectiveness of the new template process, highlight examples of good practice, and suggest what can be built on, or changed, for future rounds of panel membership recruitment.

## Respondents

4. Panel membership nominations, and associated templates, were received from 604 organisations. The vast majority were subject associations (79%), with nominations also submitted by UK government bodies / departments / NDGBs (6%), charities (6%), and commercial companies (4%). The remaining 5% of nominating bodies was made up of interest groups, mission groups, professional bodies and research councils. The organisations ranged in size from 5 members to around 120,000 members.
5. A relatively small proportion of organisations did not provide a completed template when submitting nominations. Although it was agreed that the nominated individuals would be eligible for consideration, it is the panel's view that any future call for nominations should

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Roles and recruitment of the expert panels' at [www.ref.ac.uk/publications](http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications)

include a clear statement that nominations will only be accepted when accompanied by a completed template.

## Overview of responses

6. As might be expected, given that it was the first time equality and diversity templates had been introduced, the amount and nature of information provided was very varied. Although most organisations provided relatively full information when describing the nature and size of their organisations, a good number did not comment on the diversity of its membership or staffing, nor whether or not they had an equality and diversity policy in place. Some did provide information about the diversity characteristics of their governing body or other lead committee however.
7. Answers to the question asking about how organisations identified and selected nominees, and who was involved in the decision making, were also very varied, ranging from one sentence to lengthy, well-considered and reflective responses. In general, the shortest and least informative responses tended to come from small organisations or from companies who only nominated a single person, or simply endorsed one or more people who approached their organisation and asked to be nominated. A number of organisations provided information about how they identified potential nominees, but did not comment on how they selected between them in making nominations. A few simply provided a copy of their Equality and Diversity policy, or described how their organisation approached nomination / selection in general for positions within their organisation.
8. As far as identifying a pool of potential nominees is concerned, most organisations did either widely circulate their call for nominees to their membership, or to relevant groups within it. As noted above, a smaller number simply identified one or more nominees who they had experience of working with, or endorsed people who contacted them.
9. Information about who was involved in the selection process, and the criteria used, was also very varied. Having said this, around 70 percent did provide clear information about how equality and diversity was taken into account in the selection process, and around half referred to the use of REF guidelines and contextual data provided (although in some cases the latter was rather tokenistic). In addition, a few organisations stated that they provided their selection panel with data of the E&D characteristics of their membership in addition to the wider discipline.
10. Where information about the diversity characteristics of those involved in selection was included, it mostly only covered gender. A positive aspect was that a few organisations were concerned about the diversity of the proposed selection panel and therefore took steps to address this. A relatively small number of respondents provided information on the template itself about the people being nominated (including names and / or diversity characteristics). The guidelines used for future calls for nominations will need to make it clearer that nominating bodies should not provide this information as all submitted nominees will be asked to complete anonymous equality and diversity monitoring forms by the funding bodies.

11. Interestingly, a number of respondents stated that they required those involved in the selection process to undertake equality and diversity / unconscious bias training, and others commented that all those involved in the process had undertaken relevant training during the past year. Several referred to one or more of the selection panel having been heavily involved in the preparation of Athena Swan submissions. For some, an additional measure taken was to run their proposed selection process via the organisation's (or one of the member's institution's) equality and diversity lead. A further element of good practice was that some respondents stated that they anonymised information about candidates so they were considered 'blind' by the selection panel, with no information being provided about their names, positions or Departments. There was also evidence that several organisations were concerned about the diversity of potential nominees who had been identified as part of their agreed selection process, and had therefore proactively solicited nominations from under-represented groups.
  
12. One of the most positive aspects of the process was that there was clear evidence that requiring templates to be completed had led a good number of organisations to review their procedures for nomination and / or had led them to develop and introduce an equality and diversity policy. One organisation stated that, in 2014, the chair had simply approached suitable nominees, whereas for REF 2021 the process was going to be much more open and inclusive, with an invitation being sent to all members. Another commented that the template had prompted them to consider what data collection and policies might be instituted in their organisation to help them to embed equality and diversity into their structure and processes. In addition, a few organisations stated that they had not had sufficient time to put in place a fully transparent process that took equality and diversity into account when responding to the current call, but that they would do so in response to any future calls.

### **Selected examples of good practice**

13. Overall, nearly 20 percent of respondents included one or more elements of notable good practice in their responses. A selection of these are outlined below to provide examples of processes that nominating bodies might want to consider implementing when submitting nominations in response to future calls. The examples are either direct quotes from submitted templates, or have been paraphrased slightly to aid readability.
  - 'Our initial call for nominees explicitly noted HEFCE's emphasis on equality and diversity, and asked members to go beyond the usual suspects so that we nominate people that reflect the diversity of our community as a whole. The focus was on actively encouraging applications from individuals who might not have the self-confidence or position to put themselves forward despite their many credentials.' The organisation noted that they were pleased to see this reflected in the nominations they received.
  
  - 'The membership was directed to the equality and diversity guidance made available by the funding bodies and was asked to take this into consideration when making

nominations. They were asked to nominate at least as many women as men, and to include BME selections wherever possible. The chair formed an action plan in case the nominations were not sufficiently diverse, but this action was not necessary.'

- 'We advertised the call for nominations through multiple channels to reach as wide an audience as possible. Our Inclusion and Diversity lead reviewed the text in the call to consider its inclusivity and accessibility. The text specified that we particularly welcomed nominations from people from groups previously under-represented on panels, including women, those from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and disabled people. We intend to send an anonymous survey to all potential nominees so that we can monitor our process and apply any learnings to future exercises.'
- 'We identified shortfalls in our submitted applications and made extra efforts to recruit candidates from under-represented groups. We compared our pool to the data in Annex C and allowed time in planning to approach targeted potential nominees. We found that our pool was balanced by gender. There was a representation of people of colour but no women of colour, so we took positive action to address this. There was no candidate with a declared disability. Several panel members invited potential candidates with known disabilities but they all declined citing the time commitments, the need to attend long meetings, and sometimes stay away from home as barriers.'
- 'We wrote a starter guide and a series of annexes with all the relevant information from REF documentation to reduce barriers to submitting an application by people less familiar with the process.'
- 'The process used was informed by the guidance and data in Annex C. In particular, we aimed to maximise transparency and inclusivity, for example by:
  - Encouraging self-nomination
  - Providing clear signposting to REF information and panel membership criteria
  - Communicating clearly the processes followed to select nominees
  - Stating that nominees from groups under-represented in REF2014 are encouraged
  - Considering the representativeness of the group involved in selecting nominees.'
- The following paragraph was included in one organisation's call for nominees. 'We will quite properly have to indicate to the funding bodies how we have taken account of equality and diversity in making our nominations. Accordingly, be sure to give specific additional thought to identifying women, members of black and ethnic minority groups, people with disability, LGBT and people with other protected characteristics who could be potential nominees. It is worth putting in that bit of extra effort to try to ensure that we have not unconsciously overlooked good candidates.'
- 'The process adopted to invite applications and approve nominations was informed by the guidance and data given in Annex C and was designed to be transparent and

inclusive. Eligible candidates were: made aware of the opportunity in a timely fashion; directed to relevant guidance about roles and responsibilities; offered opportunities to discuss the nomination informally; fully informed of the selection process; given adequate notice to prepare an application; given the opportunity to provide full information in support of their nomination. Candidates from under-represented groups, including women, people from ethnic minorities and people with disabilities were especially encouraged to apply at all stages.'

- 'Equality and diversity issues were addressed in a variety of ways during the nomination process:
  - We read carefully the guidance offered in Annex C and the associated links
  - We highlighted E&D in all our communications about the nomination process, for instance in all emails we sent explaining the process
  - We created our own briefing pack about the process which attempted to simplify it and make no assumptions that people would be familiar with it, to encourage people who would not previously have considered themselves eligible
  - We made prominent within this briefing document the expectations around E&D
  - We sought to widen the pool of potential nominees beyond our own immediate network of contacts
  - We invited people to complete a draft template in which we encouraged them to take account of E&D issues
  - We informally monitored this information as our shortlist of nominees grew and sought to address obvious gaps
  - We sought specific advice from one of our associates with expertise in E&D issues, who reviewed our draft communications and advised on strategies to widen diversity.'
  
- 'The guidance provided by Annex C was used extensively to inform the development and implementation of the nominations process. In particular the following points helped to shape our approach:
  - Establishing transparent criteria for processes followed to select nominees
  - Reviewing the language used in any communications and criteria in the nominations process, to consider its inclusivity and accessibility
  - Making clear in communications that nominees from groups under-represented in REF2014 panels are encouraged
  - Raising awareness of and providing training on unconscious bias for groups involved in selecting nominees.'

## **Recommended process improvements**

As part of the review process, EDAP identified a number of improvements to process that should be considered when planning, or responding to, any future calls for nominations. These are outlined below.

### **For the Funding Bodies**

- Provide clearer guidance on what is meant by 'equality and diversity issues'.
- Clarify which types of organisation are eligible to nominate candidates. Any organisation, association, interest or advocacy group with an interest in REF is eligible to nominate, even if relatively small, and even if they have not previously made nominations.
- Clarify within the template guidance that only organisational information in the context of equality and diversity is required. Several organisations provided us with information on their infrastructure, finances, etc.
- Review the accessibility of the call for nominations and accompanying material, ensuring including that it is fully understandable by those who are less familiar with the process.
- Clarify in the guidance that nominating bodies should not include potentially identifying personal data about nominees' protected characteristics, and that this information will be collected centrally by the REF team in an anonymous survey.
- Provide further information on how nominating bodies might want to use the contextual information and data on equality and diversity characteristics of the wider HE sector, provided by the funding bodies.
- Clarify for nominating bodies what might constitute positive action (e.g. requiring nominations of both men and women), and what constitutes discriminatory practice (e.g. nominating only men from a set of eligible male and female nominees).
- Provide more detailed information on the types of reasonable adjustments that can be made in relation to panel meetings to provide encouragement for individuals with a disability or caring responsibilities.
- Re-design the template so that it is more structured, with more sub-sections and more detailed guidance on the information required for each sub-section.
- Clearly state that nominations will only be accepted where accompanied by a statement setting out how equality and diversity has been taken into account in the nominating body's selection processes.

### **For the Nominating Bodies**

- Very small organisations, or those who do not normally nominate to such exercises, might wish to consider working with one or more other nominating bodies with similar interests in order to address the suggested improvements in process that follow.
- Circulate the call for nominees as widely as possible, going beyond the usual individuals, groups, and seniority levels. It has been noted that barriers to progression for those in certain under-represented groups (such as BME), may mean that they have the right experience without having attained the usual markers of seniority.
- Consider the full range of protected characteristics when developing nominations processes and encouraging interest from individuals.
- Consider the diversity of the panel or set of individuals involved in the selection process.

- Provide information to potential nominees about how the organisation will go about the selection process and what criteria they will use.
- Consider offering feedback to individuals considered for nominations but not put forward to the funding bodies.
- When completing the template, provide clearer and directly relevant information in response to each question, rather than outline general processes or simply link to an existing policy.
- In addition, make it clearer how any provided contextual information has been used to inform the organisation's approach to identifying and selecting between nominees.

## **Next Steps**

Following the survey on institutional submission intentions in late 2019, panels will meet in early 2020 to identify areas where additional membership is required. The Funding Bodies will issue a call for additional panel members in spring 2020. We are hopeful that the nominations submitted will follow the good practice identified in this report and include a higher proportion of individuals from currently under-represented groups, particularly BME, LGBT and disabled staff.



# Annex A: Nominating body template for submitting information on equality and diversity in the nominations process

## Introduction

1. All associations or organisations wishing to submit nominations for REF panel membership will need to provide information about how equality and diversity issues were taken into account in putting forward nominations, using the template below.
2. The information provided by nominating bodies will be reviewed by the Equality and Diversity Advisory Group (EDAP) to consider examples of good practice. Where a nominating body's report suggests that equality and diversity issues may not have been appropriately taken into account the funding bodies may request further information. EDAP's findings will be summarised and published in a report, which will inform any amendments to the nominations process for the assessment phase.
3. Information on equality and diversity in the nominations process submitted in this template may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the relevant Freedom of Information Acts across the UK. The Acts give a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case the four UK funding bodies. This includes information provided in this template. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means that information submitted in this template is unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. For further information about the Acts see the Information Commissioner's Office website, <https://ico.org.uk/> or, in Scotland, the website of the Scottish Information Commissioner [www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/](http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/).
4. The completed template should be submitted when making nominations through the online nominations form at [www.ref.ac.uk/about/nompan](http://www.ref.ac.uk/about/nompan).

## Template for nominating bodies

Name of nominating body

Q1. Please describe the nature and size of your association or organisation, including research areas of interest and details of any organisational policies on diversity and inclusion (max 250 words).

Q2. Describe the process your association or organisation followed in making nominations, and how equality and diversity issues were taken into account in the process followed (max 750 words). This could include, where applicable:

- A description of any distinct processes followed for identifying a pool of candidates, and then for selecting nominees from among the pool identified.
- A description of any differences in the processes followed for different panels, where making nominations to multiple panels.
- Information about who (in terms of job roles) from your association or organisation was involved in the nominations process.
- Considerations relating to the diversity of the group(s) involved in any selection processes, as well as considerations relating to the diversity of the pool of nominees.
- Information about how the guidance and data provided at Annex C informed any processes followed

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