
REF 2020/01
June 2020

Survey on initial views on the REF timetable

Summary of Responses

REF 2021 Research
Excellence
Framework

	Page
Executive summary	1
Introduction	2
Question 1: REF submission deadline	3
Question 2: Impact assessment period	7

Survey on initial views on the REF timetable

Summary of Responses

Executive summary

Purpose

On 24 March 2020 the REF was put on hold until further notice in order to recognise that, in light of COVID-19, institutions are needing to divert staff resource to other critical areas, including for those in clinical and health-related fields. The REF team wished to reassure institutions that such activities could be prioritised without concern for the effect on REF preparations. As part of the development of contingency arrangements for the exercise, the REF team ran a webinar for institutions on 21 April, setting out the two issues on which we sought views in an online survey. These were the timing of the submission deadline, and whether or not to extend the assessment period for impact. The survey was open for two weeks, closing on 5 May 2020. This document summarises responses to the survey.

Key points

The survey sought views on two questions, as follows:

- Preferences for the revised REF submission deadline
- Preferences for the end of the impact assessment period as an initial step towards taking account of the effect of COVID-19 on impact submissions

Responses to Question 1, concerning the revised REF submission deadline, indicated a preference for a short extension to the submission deadline to March 2021. This preference was stronger among HEIs; responses from individuals indicated more mixed preferences.

Responses to Question 2, concerning the impact assessment period, indicated a preference for a universal extension to the assessment period to December 2020. Divergent arguments were made by respondents favouring either the universal extension or keeping the end of July 2020.

Action required

This document is for information.

To

Heads of universities in Northern Ireland

Heads of higher education institutions in Scotland

Heads of higher education institutions in Wales

Heads of alternative providers in England

Subject associations

Organisations with an interest in commissioning and using academic research including businesses, public sector bodies, charities and other third sector organisations

Of interest to those responsible for

Research, planning

Reference

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Introduction

1. On 24 March 2020 the REF was put on hold until further notice in order to recognise that, in light of COVID-19, institutions are needing to divert staff resource to other critical areas, including for those in clinical and health-related fields. The REF team wished to reassure institutions that such activities could be prioritised without concern for the effect on REF preparations. As part of the development of contingency arrangements for the exercise, the REF team ran a webinar for institutions on 21 April, setting out the two issues on which we sought views in an online survey. These were the timing of the submission deadline, and whether or not to extend the assessment period for impact. The survey was open for two weeks, closing on 5 May 2020. This document summarises responses to the survey. Table 1 sets out the number of respondents, by respondent type.

Responses from:	Number
Individuals	358
Businesses	5
Departments or research groups	57
HEIs	144
Public sector organisations	1
Representative bodies	14
Subject associations or learned societies	20
Others	42
TOTAL	641

Table 1: Sources of responses to the survey

Summary of responses to the survey

This section summarises, in turn, responses to the two questions posed in the survey.

Question 1: REF submission deadline

Question 1: 'At this point in time, what is your preference for the revised REF submission deadline?'

- a. A single deadline, by March 2021.
- b. A phased deadline, starting with staff & outputs in March 2021.
- c. A delay of six months or more for all aspects.
- d. Other.

2. A total of 639 respondents provided a response to Question 1. Table 2 shows a summary of responses by respondent type. Other than among the individual category, a single March 2021 submission deadline was the preferred option. Responses from individuals indicated a slight preference for a delay of six months or more to the submission deadline. The highest level of support for a March 2021 submission deadline came from HEIs.

	March		6 months +		Phased		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Individual	100	28%	113	32%	64	18%	77	22%
Business	2	40%	1	20%	1	20%	1	20%
Department or research group	19	33%	15	26%	8	14%	15	26%
HEI	84	58%	24	17%	24	17%	13	9%
Public sector organisation	0	0%	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Representative body	6	43%	1	7%	2	14%	5	36%
Subject association or learned society	11	52%	5	24%	0	0%	5	24%
Other	18	43%	12	29%	8	19%	4	10%
Grand total	240	38%	172	27%	107	17%	120	19%

Table 2: Responses to Question 1 by respondent type

3. The breakdown of responses from HEIs by UK nation (table 3) shows that for England, Scotland and Wales, March 2021 was the preferred option for the revised submission date. Respondents from Northern Irish institutions preferred a phased submission deadline option.

	March		6 months +		Phased		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
England	71	61%	19	16%	15	13%	12	10%
Northern Ireland	0	0%	0	0%	2	100%	0	0%
Scotland	8	44%	4	22%	5	28%	1	6%
Wales	5	63%	1	13%	2	25%	0	0%
Grand total	84	58%	24	17%	24	17%	13	9%

Table 3: HEI responses to Question 1 by region

4. The breakdown of HEI responses to Question 1 by TRAC peer group¹ (table 4) shows that there was an overall preference for a single submission deadline in March 2021 among all groups. This trend was also observable by mission group. Peer Group C (institutions with research income between 5 per cent and 15 per cent of total income) was less likely than average to prefer a March deadline, and indeed nearly equal numbers of Peer Group C institutions were in favour of a six month or longer delay and a March 2021 deadline. Similarly, this analysis also shows that peer group F institutions – small, specialist arts institutions – were less likely to favour the March 2021 option than average, with similar overall numbers from this group preferring either a March 2021 deadline or a delay of at least six months.

	March		6 months +		Phased		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
A	21	66%	5	16%	4	13%	2	6%
B	16	73%	2	9%	2	9%	2	9%
C	8	35%	7	30%	5	22%	3	13%
D	12	75%	1	6%	2	13%	1	6%
E	20	59%	5	15%	9	26%	0	0%
F	5	31%	4	25%	2	13%	5	31%
No TRAC group	2	100%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Grand Total	84	58%	24	17%	24	17%	13	9%

Table 4: HEI responses to Question 1 by TRAC group

¹Further information on TRAC can be found at <https://www.trac.ac.uk/tracguidance/>

5. Of the submissions received, 513 respondents provided substantive additional comment on Question 1, covering a range of issues. The most frequently raised issues are detailed below, set out by the main response categories in order of volume of support. The analysis is separated by organisation/group and individual responses.

A single deadline, by 31 March 2021

6. Around a third of organisation/group responses raised the following arguments in support of a single March deadline:

- The option provides the best balance in giving some time and recognition of the effects that COVID-19 has had on university REF preparations, while 'getting on with it'. Around 40 per cent of HEI respondents made this point. Four months was felt by many to be enough time to mitigate the effects on submissions, with some feeling a longer period would not offer anything further.
- The option gives the benefit of keeping funding informed by REF 2021 according to the original timetable. Around 40 per cent of HEI respondents noted this. Some highlighted possible research funding risks associated with funding delays. A small number of HEIs also flagged the considerable development/change in research profile/strategy since 2014, which underlined concerns not to delay this aspect.
- A shorter delay will help mitigate or better balance the upcoming resourcing pressures HEIs will face in the period ahead. There was general concern that the calls on staff time will be increasing, and focusing REF preparations in a shorter period would both help to manage this for staff, rather than being in a perpetual state, as well as keep engagement and focus on this task. Around 10 per cent of organisation/group respondents identified equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) concerns in relation to these points. Some raised concerns about staff on fixed term roles working on REF, and the likely difficulties HEIs would face in keeping staff in post as time goes on.
- Over a third of HEIs also made the point that it will be important to move on to focus on new priorities, challenges, and research strategies in rebuilding and recovering from the impact of COVID-19, and that staff resource would need to be diverted to these areas. Often linked to this was the concern to maintain, or not lose, momentum. For some there was concern that a long delay would require restarting, rewriting and re-energising staff engagement. Also associated with this, respondents expressed concern that additional time would likely add to the burden of preparing submissions, as more work is put into refining materials.
- For most institutions, a significant amount of work had been undertaken in preparation, and submissions would be nearing completion.

7. Around a quarter of HEI respondents (and around a fifth of organisation/group respondents overall) identified a single, short deadline as simplest, and most straightforward option, giving much-needed clarity and enabling HEIs to start planning. The phased option was often seen as potentially too complex and burdensome.

8. Also, around a quarter of HEI respondents gave support for having the census date and assessment periods as close as possible to the submission deadline. Concern was raised about the integrity and value of an assessment that is increasingly distant from the period being assessed.

9. Around a quarter of HEIs also made suggestions for streamlining or adding mitigating approaches to the exercise.

10. Individual respondents, in general, made the point that the REF cycle extends over a period of years, that the current disruption is towards the latter stages of this period, and that institutions are advanced in preparation of their submissions. A number also identified that adding additional time into the REF timetable would inevitably increase the burden, that there was a need to sustain the momentum of the exercise, and that restarting would add burden. A similar number highlighted that continuing with the most minimal delay would be the most simple and straightforward approach, and that a single deadline would be important to maintain the integrity of the exercise.

A delay of six months or more for all aspects

11. There were 59 organisation/group respondents selecting this option. Over half of these respondents flagged concern about capacity issues in the immediate period ahead, while HEIs would be focusing on rebuilding and recovery, and would not have sufficient time or focus to divert to REF preparations. This often included the focus of academic staff around moving teaching online. For some, these issues raised concern about the pressures on and ability to engage staff, and consequently on staff wellbeing. Around a third of organisation/group respondents raised EDI concerns in relation to this, and REF submission issues more generally (for example, caring responsibilities impacting on the ability to produce outputs).

12. Additionally, raised by two fifths of organisation/group respondents, was concern that at this stage it is impossible to know whether a shorter deadline would be achievable. Respondents identified there were still too many unknowns and considered that deciding on a March deadline at this stage would risk needing to move it again later. Around a quarter supported, or thought more feasible, an intermediate deadline (around May to July); around a fifth supported a longer deadline (most often 12 months). 17 per cent felt the phased approach would be complex and add burden. Around 15 per cent of organisation/group respondents did not think four months' delay would be sufficient time to account for the effects from COVID-19 on submissions.

13. For individual respondents, the six month delay or longer option was the approach with the greatest support. The key issue, identified by roughly a third of individual respondents, was similarly that HEIs would be rebuilding capacity and have significant other priorities and calls on resource through summer and autumn of this year, and that REF activity would distract from key priorities. Impacts on staff wellbeing, as well as potentially unequal impacts across different groups of a shorter deadline were both raised by approximately 15 per cent of individual respondents. Additionally, nearly a quarter of individual respondents raised concern about current uncertainty and risks around moving the deadline again.

A phased deadline, starting with staff & outputs in March 2021

14. Key concerns for all respondents selecting this option were the need to allow additional time for impact activities and collection of evidence, given the significant disruption caused to this element of submissions. Many noted that outputs and environment will be most advanced and will be able to be submitted at the earliest stage, however impact will need longer.

15. Around a fifth of responses from organisations/groups indicated that the phased option struck the right balance, or offered the fairest approach, to accounting for the effects on impact (and sometimes environment), while maintaining momentum and getting on with it. Some responses also echoed arguments from those supporting the single March

deadline, including concern about prolonging resourcing pressures, delay adding burden and noting the advanced nature of submission preparations.

16. Individual respondents also raised ongoing impacts on staff time and wellbeing. A number also highlighted a need for HEIs and staff to prioritise the student experience and changes to teaching through the latter part of this year.

Other

17. Respondents who opted for the 'other' option presented a wide range of views and a mix of different preferences for the deadline from March, through to May/June, up to 12 months. Some did not express a time preference, suggested the REF should not continue at all, or instead raised other issues or concerns.

18. Over a third of organisation/group respondents raised issues in relation to staff wellbeing and EDI concerns. A similar proportion raised issues in relation to outputs, particularly around the effects of COVID-19 on practice research where social distancing has made very challenging the 'effective dissemination' of these outputs. Some offered suggestions for mitigations (concerning outputs, and more widely).

19. Some of the points raised echoed those recorded above. Around a fifth of organisation/group respondents flagged concern about capacity issues in the immediate period ahead, while HEIs would be focusing on rebuilding and recovery, and would not have sufficient time or focus to divert to REF preparations.

20. Among individual respondents, around 36 per cent advocated cancelling the exercise. Roughly a third called for an extension of 12 months or longer. About 15 per cent highlighted uncertainty, and noted that a short deadline risks having to be changed again.

Question 2: impact assessment period

Question 2: 'The end of the assessment period for impact is 31 July 2020. Which of the following options would you prefer as an initial step towards taking account of the effects of Covid-19 on impact submissions?'

- a. Universal extension to the assessment period for impact to 31 December 2020
- b. Keep 31 July 2020 in place as the end of the assessment period, but ensure a case-by-case mitigation route for individual, affected case studies that have been delayed past this point.
- c. Other.

21. There were a total of 603 responses to Question 2. Table 5 shows the percentages of those responding that selected each option: July 2020, December 2020 or 'other'. As the table shows, a majority of respondents favoured a December 2020 end to the assessment period, with similar numbers overall favouring either July 2020 or another option.

22. Among HEIs, there were some notable differences in preference. Welsh institutions were most likely to favour a December 2020 deadline (63 per cent) while the July and December options were equally preferred among Scottish HEIs (35 per cent favoured each option). English institutions' preferences were broadly in line with the overall average. Responses from Northern Irish institutions were equally split between the July and 'other' options.

	July 2020		December 2020		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
Individual	76	23%	165	50%	88	27%
Business	1	20%	2	40%	2	40%
Department or research group	16	29%	23	41%	17	30%
HEI	37	26%	66	46%	40	28%
Public sector organisation	1	100%	0	0%	0	0%
Representative body	2	14%	7	50%	5	36%
Subject association or learned society	2	11%	13	68%	4	21%
Other	8	22%	24	67%	4	11%
Grand total	143	24%	300	50%	160	27%

Table 5: Responses to Question 2 by respondent type

	July 2020		December 2020		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
England	28	24%	55	47%	33	28%
Wales	2	25%	5	63%	1	13%
Scotland	6	35%	6	35%	5	29%
Northern Ireland	1	50%	0	0%	1	50%
Grand total	37	26%	66	46%	40	28%

Table 6: HEI responses to Question 2 by region

23. Institutions from the Russell Group were evenly split between the July and 'other' options (46 per cent), but were unlikely to prefer the December option (eight per cent). Million+ (56 per cent) and University Alliance institutions (82 per cent) both preferred a universal extension to December 2020.

24. When HEI responses are analysed by TRAC peer group, the preferences of small specialist arts HEIs (peer group F) show a slight preference for a December rather than July deadline, but an overall preference for an 'other' option. Analysis by TRAC group also shows that peer group C institutions (those with research income between 5 and 15 per cent of their total income) were very likely to prefer a December 2020 end to the impact assessment period. Peer Group D and E institutions also preferred the December option. Peer group A (institutions with medical schools and research income of 20 per cent or more of their total income) preferred the July 2020 option over December 2020, by contrast,

but still preferred an 'other' option overall. Peer group B institutions (those with research income above 15 per cent of total income but without a medical school) were evenly split between the July and December options.

	July 2020		December 2020		Other	
	Count	%	Count	%	Count	%
A	12	38%	7	22%	13	41%
B	9	41%	9	41%	4	18%
C	2	9%	16	73%	4	18%
D	5	31%	7	44%	4	25%
E	6	18%	21	62%	7	21%
F	3	20%	4	27%	8	53%
No TRAC group	0	0%	2	100%	0	0%
Grand total	37	26%	66	46%	40	28%

Table 7: HEI responses to Question 2 by TRAC peer group

December 2020 deadline to impact assessment period

25. Respondents preferring a December 2020 end to the impact assessment period also outlined their arguments for this in their comments. These arguments are summarised here in descending order of prevalence.

26. The most common argument – that a December 2020 deadline would be less burdensome and/or fairer than a case-by-case mitigation process – was made by 122 respondents; constituting 40 per cent of respondents in favour of the December option. 64 per cent of HEIs in favour of the December option cited this argument.

27. Just under 30 per cent of respondents that preferred December 2020 noted that the pandemic has resulted in significant disruption to the impact element of REF submissions, and just under half of such comments were made by HEIs. There was also a marked difference in HEIs making this argument by mission group. Only one Russell Group institution made this point, compared to 55 per cent of all University Alliance institutions that submitted to the survey.

28. Another commonly made argument, made by just over a fifth of those in favour of December 2020, was that an extension to the impact assessment period would allow the recommencement of activity that has currently been paused due to COVID-19. Nearly 60 per cent of such arguments were made by HEIs. Many of these respondents did however note that an extension would not allow the resumption or postponement of all affected activity.

29. Approximately 15 per cent of respondents in favour of December (over half of which were HEIs) suggested that a December 2020 end to the impact assessment period should also be accompanied by case-by-case mitigations. As with those in favour of the July

deadline, a number of respondents suggested possible mitigation options. However, 10 per cent of those in favour of the December option (most of which were HEIs) also noted that case-by-case mitigations could create risk and undermine the robustness of the exercise. Respondents were particularly concerned about the likelihood of mitigations not being accepted by panels and that there would be opportunities to 'game' the mitigations offered.

30. A small number of respondents (particularly across representative bodies, subject associations and small, specialist HEIs) noted that extending the impact assessment period would mitigate the pronounced effects on impact for Arts and Humanities disciplines, and on small HEIs facing issues related to health, caring responsibilities and re-prioritisation of teaching work faced by their staff.

July 2020 deadline for impact assessment period

31. Respondents that selected the July 2020 end to the impact assessment period as their preference made several arguments for this preference in their comments. These arguments are summarised here in descending order of prevalence.

32. The most commonly made argument (made by 72 respondents (50 per cent) that preferred a July deadline) was that a July deadline for the impact assessment period would be fairer and less burdensome. In particular, respondents argued that in the event of a universal extension to December 2020, significant burden would be created by HEIs seeking to review or revise all impact case studies to take account of the new end to the impact assessment period. HEIs were particularly likely to argue that a July deadline constitutes lower burden, with nearly 40 per cent of those with a July preference making this point. However, Scottish HEIs (29 per cent) were more likely than English HEIs (17 per cent) to cite this argument. Russell Group respondents were particularly likely to argue that a July deadline constituted lower burden, with 45 per cent of all Russell Group respondents to the survey making this point.

33. Just under half of those preferring the July 2020 option argued that case-by-case mitigations should be introduced. 70 per cent of HEIs in favour of the July option made this comment. Respondents also made suggestions for possible mitigations that could be implemented, including removal of the requirement for corroborating evidence to be submitted upfront and the addition of 'COVID-19 statements' to either impact case studies or environment statements.

34. Just under 30 per cent of respondents in favour of the July option argued that only a small percentage of the impact assessment period and/or a small number of impact case studies have been affected by the pandemic. Nearly 50 per cent of HEIs in favour of July made this argument. Just over a third of the instances of this argument were made by HEIs in the Russell Group.

35. A fifth of respondents in favour of the July option argued against a universal extension to December 2021, noting that such an extension would be highly unlikely to capture or facilitate all postponed or cancelled activities. Half of the comments of this nature were made by HEIs.

36. Smaller numbers of respondents – predominantly HEIs – made other arguments in favour of a July 2020 end to the impact assessment period. These included both the argument that an extension to the submission deadline to at least March 2021 would

sufficiently account for the additional time now required to collect evidence for and write up impact case studies; and the argument that an extension to the impact assessment period beyond July 2020 would render a March 2021 submission deadline challenging.

Other

37. Overall, 160 respondents indicated an 'other' preference in the survey. Many of these suggested in their comments some support for the proposed July 2020 or December 2020 deadline options. The remainder noted a preference for a range of alternative deadlines including July 2021, December 2021, and an as yet unfixed deadline to be set only after the suspension of lockdown and/or social distancing. However, only very small numbers of any one respondent preferred any of these alternative deadlines. Those preferring a longer extension commonly noted the significant effect of COVID-19 on impact activities as well as significant effects on small HEIs and the Arts and Humanities.

38. Approximately a fifth of those selecting 'other' argued that mitigations should be included in the revised framework. Those who expanded upon this suggested the same possible mitigations as respondents who preferred the July or December options. By contrast, a small number of respondents who selected the 'other' option (8) argued that there should be not mitigations implemented for impact. Most of these arguments were made by HEIs and the remainder by individuals. In the main, these arguments centred on the idea that implementing mitigations would create burden.



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