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# Advice on Contingency Planning

**REF** 2021 Research  
Excellence  
Framework

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**To**

Heads of higher education institutions in the UK

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**Of interest to those responsible for Research**

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

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

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**Other enquiries**

Elin Morris,  
tel 0117 931 7648,  
email [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk)

## Executive summary

### Purpose

On 31 July 2020, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) was formally restarted after being paused in March 2020 due to COVID-19. In light of the ongoing disruption the funding bodies expect due to COVID-19, this document provides advice on contingency planning that higher education institutions (HEIs) may wish to implement in order to minimise further disruption to the preparation of REF submissions, making REF submissions in the submission system, and responding to audit queries during the assessment phase.

### Key points

This document provides advice on contingency planning for the following areas:

- The submission of physical outputs
- Key staff members within HEIs
- Remote access to required systems
- On-site access

HEIs may wish to implement the advice where appropriate and possible, in order to minimise disruption to submissions and other elements of the REF exercise.

Further contingency guidance will be made available in autumn 2020 when more evidence about the scale and nature of COVID-19 effects on HEI preparations and submissions in the lead up to the 31 March 2021 submission deadline is available.

### Action required

This document is for information.

## **Introduction**

1. On 31 July 2020, the REF exercise was formally restarted after being paused in March 2020 due to COVID-19. In light of the ongoing disruption the funding bodies expect due to COVID-19, this document provides advice on contingency planning that HEIs may wish to consider in order to minimise further disruption to the preparation of REF submissions, making REF submissions in the submission system, and responding to audit queries during the assessment phase.

2. Further contingency guidance will be made available in autumn 2020 when more evidence about the scale and nature of COVID-19 effects on HEI preparations and submissions in the lead up to the 31 March 2021 submission deadline is available.

## Physical outputs

3. In order to manage the risks of disruption to the sourcing and sending of physical outputs to the REF warehouse, HEIs may wish to consider the following three areas:
  - a. Consider making electronic submission of outputs where possible. Annex K of the 'Guidance on submissions' (2019/01) outlines the collection formats for each output type, including the digital formats that each output type may be submitted in.
  - b. Consider what electronic options are available for submission for outputs that are currently in physical form, in the event that the sourcing and sending of physical outputs is disrupted in the immediate period of the submission deadline.
  - c. Consider the processes required within the HEI for the sourcing, documenting and sending of physical outputs during the expected continued disruption due to COVID-19. For example, HEIs may wish to consider what guidance on working safely may be required for staff handling and sending physical outputs; whether quarantine periods may be required for physical outputs; and the number of staff required, as a result of changes to normal processes to account for social distancing and other precautions.
4. Further guidance on submitting physical outputs will be available in autumn 2020, following additional evidence collection and analysis by the REF team.

## Key staff

5. A number of different staff members are likely to be involved in the preparation, submission and audit elements of the REF. The funding bodies anticipate that staff availability and priorities may continue to be disrupted in HEIs due to COVID-19, including, but not limited to, staff sickness, self-isolation and shielding, and caring responsibilities.
6. HEIs may wish to develop and implement processes to ensure that no part of their REF submission, or ability to respond to audit queries, is subject to a single point of failure due to staff unavailability. For example, institutions may wish to consider:
  - a. Appointing additional authorised submitters. HEIs will, optionally, be able to assign a third authorised submitter. HEIs should contact [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) to make amendments to authorised submitter details for their institution. The latest point for amending authorised submitter details before the final submission deadline on 31 March 2021 will be 24 March 2021.
  - b. Ensuring shared inboxes or other suitable cascade processes are in place for communications sent by the REF team to REF contacts and technical contacts.
  - c. Ensuring appropriate cascade or other suitable processes are in place for communications sent by the REF team to REF6 contacts and audit contacts, while making sure these processes continue to account for the sensitive information

shared with these contacts.

## **Remote access to required systems**

7. In the event of local or national lockdowns in the immediate period surrounding the submission deadline (31 March 2021) and during the assessment phase when audit queries may be raised, HEIs should ensure adequate access to all systems required for their REF submissions. The funding bodies encourage HEIs to:

- a. Ensure all relevant staff have remote access to all systems required for preparation and submission to REF as well as for audit queries.
- b. Test remote access to these systems in advance of expected use.

## **On-site access**

8. The funding bodies are aware that some HEIs may require on-site access to university campuses and buildings in order to make REF preparations and submissions and to respond to audit queries. In the event of local or national lockdowns or other restrictions, on-site access may be difficult or impossible for staff. In order to reduce the risk associated with this, the funding bodies encourage HEIs to:

- a. Identify in advance all areas of submissions requiring on-site access: e.g. for physical HR records for the audit of REF6 requests; access to physical copies of corroborating evidence for impact case studies; and access to facilities and sufficient resource to digitise materials for submission, including outputs.
- b. Consider digitising physical items, such as documents and outputs, in advance of originally intended schedules where appropriate and feasible.



Cyngor Cyllido Addysg  
Uwch Cymru  
Higher Education Funding  
Council for Wales



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Nicholson House  
Lime Kiln Close  
Stoke Gifford  
Bristol BS34 8SR

tel 0117 931 7392  
e-mail [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk)  
[ref.ac.uk](http://ref.ac.uk)

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