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| Institution | Edinburgh Napier University |
| 1. What, in your view, are the most important features of REF 2021 for higher education institutions? Why? | At Edinburgh Napier, we believe that the overarching REF2021 principles are important features of the exercise, ensuring **Fairness, transparency, robustness, and inclusiveness.** Most importantly**:**  -The recognition and **equity** of **all types** of research, assessed on an equal basis.  -An auditable and **inclusive** approach to staff submission, (appropriately tailored) where all staff with Significant Responsibility are submitted as opposed to the previous selective approach.  -Output portability ensuring submission of outputs from staff in post on the census date **as well as** **former staff** members, acknowledging where the research was undertaken and rewarding that investment.  -**Robust audit** procedures with appropriate ‘remedies’ for non-compliance, to ensure fairness across all participating institutions. |
| 1. In relation to preparing REF submissions, what positive reflections do you have on the process? Why? | Impact case studies were a good way of structuring the impact component and provided a key focal point to support researchers to engage in impact within their research, more generally.  The introduction of a bespoke Code of Practice has potential for positive impacts for the University’s research culture and individuals’ career trajectory, with an intent to clearly define individuals’ research expectations / deliverables. Furthermore, the process of preparing the REF submission enabled us to reflect and take stock of the full research portfolio, informing our future strategy development. |
| 1. In relation to preparing REF submissions, which aspects of the process were challenging? Why? | **General:**  -The late publication of the final version of the guidance made it challenging to put systems and guidance in place to support academics. It left limited time to implement the Code of Practice. While we can see the advantage of reacting to sector developments, earlier convergence on a stable framework would be beneficial.  -The complex and lengthy guidance documents were ambiguous in places and difficult to cross-reference. (GoS, PWM, Annexes, Supplementary guidance, FAQs, Audit amendments, Covid mitigations).  **Staff:**  -The research independence definition proved problematic when trying to establish which staff were to be considered independent in research, given different disciplines and levels of responsibility.  **Outputs**:  -Increased Workload: The minimum and maximum quota was difficult to administer and required a large volume of internal output quality review to ensure the final optimal combination of outputs. This often resulted in multiple proposed variations of the optimal combination of outputs, making it difficult to finalise the submission.  -The language of the Open Access policy provided difficulties in interpretation, resulting in it being difficult to implement the details of the policy. It is suggested that practitioners are consulted before the next policy is published.  -The identification of interdisciplinary research was challenging. It was unclear how the guidelines should be implemented; what were the benefits of utilising the category; and how it would be reviewed by the panel. (Particularly when the panel has discretion to refer outputs to the interdisciplinary panel regardless of the institutional flag). There was also a need for clearer guidelines to avoid confusion between interdisciplinary and cross-referral.  **Impact:**  -The guidelines on impact evidence appeared to be bureaucratic. Collating and submitting evidence was time consuming. It involved a lot of work for the author as well as the corroborating contacts who were providing the evidence, with no guarantee that it would be reviewed. There is also question over inclusion of evidence submitted in a foreign language, and whether these could be at a disadvantage if the evidence is not translated.  **Environment:**  -The amount of work involved with REF 5a/b was disproportionate to the (lack of) weighting. The format for the REF5 research environment narrative was unwieldy, covering a wide spectrum of information in an open-form format, resulting in the potential for answers which lacked focus. There is a preference for a more structured format which enables the institution to demonstrate development/ growth in the period. There is also a need for clearer guidelines on how the REF5s would be assessed.  The REF5a pilot required a lot of work, despite not being evaluated in this exercise. In this context, the link between 5a and 5b is questionable, because the Unit narrative remains reliant on information contained in the ‘*unscored*’ REF5a.  There are challenges in submitting REF5b statements aligned to Units of Assessments, where this does not reflect the University’s departmental structures – for example when two schools contribute to a Unit of Assessment. Discretion to submit environment information in a format which better reflects the University structure would be preferable.  **UoA Structures / Descriptors**  -The Unit of Assessment structure presents challenges where staff and their respective outputs need to be artificially ‘shoehorned’ into an alternative unit descriptor to prevent the submission of very small units of assessment. The creation of a coherent environment narrative can become more challenging as a result of any artificial alignment.  **E&D:**  -The benefit of Unit circumstance reduction was difficult to communicate to staff and for was under-utilised in our submission. This presented a potential opportunity for game-playing in the sector where institutions ‘*encouraged*’ declaration rather than adhering to the principle of no undue pressure.  \* Particularly with ECA status where this was recorded in parallel for the HESA return. |
| 1. Please describe any benefits you identify in participating in the REF for your institution | REF provides **recognition and reward** for areas of excellence within institutions, with appreciation for **all types** of excellent research.  In addition, REF has positively driven the impact agenda and highlighted the importance of societal impacts arising from publicly funded research in the UK.  As noted in Question 2, the process of preparing the REF submission has enabled us to reflect and take stock of the full research portfolio, informing our future strategy development. |
| 1. Please describe any negative implications you identify in participating in the REF for your institution. | REF has the potential to demotivate researchers if reputation and recognition is driven by inclusion of outputs in submissions. Research staff need to be recognised beyond REF and celebrated more widely for their contributions, in order to promote a diverse research culture. The Stern report emphasised the need to reduce the burden on institutions, but this was not realised through REF2021. The cost in assessing the quality of research outputs was particularly onerous in this exercise.  REF can distract from progressing with other important strategic research objectives, particularly in the final stages of preparation. |
| 1. What positive and negative effects did the key changes since REF 2014 have? | **Positive:**  **Promote Inclusivity**:  This exercise enhances inclusivity through the non-selective submission. Introduction of a bespoke Code of Practice (if implemented effectively) has some positive impacts for the University’s research culture and career trajectory by helping to clearly define individuals’ research expectations.  **Recognition of historic investment:** The transitionary approach to portability allows the inclusion of former staff members’ outputs, recognising the University’s historic investment and contribution to the outputs.  **Decoupling:** The attempt to decouple staff and outputs was welcomed in this exercise signalling a move towards unit-based submission rather than individually focussed. (However, this wasn’t fully realised in REF2021 due to the partial nature of the rules, resulting in increased burden relating to quality review and final attribution of outputs).  **Raise the importance of impact:** The increased weighting for impact case studies signals the importance of outcomes from UK research.  **Avoid duplication:** The introduction of an institutional environment statement addressing a number of important strategic research initiatives without the need to duplicate the information in each UoA statement was welcomed, although somewhat unclear how this actually contributes to the REF5b score.  **Open Research:** REF has been instrumental in driving the Open research agenda and has embedded the process of depositing accepted manuscripts in repositories.  **Negative:**  **Restrictive timeframes:**  The short timeframe by which to develop, approve and implement a complex Code of Practice for staff submission meant that decisions were made very late in the period.  **Demotivating effect:** Although the benefit of unit submission through min/max quota helps to alleviate pressure to deliver on some individuals, it also leaves some academics feeling that they were unable to submit their full portfolio.  It could also encourage undesirable co-authoring practices, whereby staff focus their efforts on internal output co-authoring, rather than external co-authoring, in order to increase the number of their papers submitted to REF.  **Increased workload:**  See question 3 - Challenges  **Unintentionally inequitable**: The attempt to remove / minimise the sensitive circumstance reduction requests of 2014 was not effectively realised in REF2021. See question 1 (E&D) |
| 1. How did COVID-19 affect your submissions to REF 2021? To what extent were the mitigations put in place helpful? | Covid-19 had a relatively minimal effect on our actual submission, aside from the obvious disruptions caused by remote working. We were able to accommodate the effects accordingly through the additional statement provision.  The introduction of Covid-19 mitigations were sensible and helpful, although retention of the original July 2020 impact deadline might have been fairer, to avoid inclusion of new Covid-specific impacts, where the actual impact was still relatively unknown in Dec 2020, and might have been better assessed in future REF cycles. |
| 1. Are there any further comments you would like to add regarding REF 2021? | The online submission system was very intuitive and easy to use and interrogate, the ability to run error reports and automatic checking of DOIs being especially helpful.  The index of revisions to the audit guidance and GoS was confusing and difficult to navigate. Often the FAQ page provided greater clarity, however the increasing volume of FAQs reflected the growing confusion amongst the REF community. |