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Consultation on the second Research Excellence Framework

This Word version of the response form is available to help respondents prepare responses before submitting them through the online form. Do not respond to the consultation using this Word form. Only responses received through the online form will be reviewed and included in our analysis.

1. Respondent details

Responses to this consultation are invited from any organisation, group or individual with an interest in research or research assessment. We will publish an analysis of the consultation responses. We may publish individual responses to the consultation in the summary. Additionally, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the relevant Freedom of Information Acts across the UK. Responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. Please note that each question has a limit of 500 words.

Please indicate who you are responding on behalf of

- As an individual
- Higher education institution
- Subject association or learned society
- Representative body
- Department or research group
- Business
- Charity
- Public sector organisation
- Other

Please provide the name of your organisation

Equality Challenge Unit (ECU). ECU works to further and support equality and diversity for staff and students in higher education institutions across all four nations of the UK and in colleges in Scotland. ECU is funded by the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and

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Universities UK, and through direct subscription from higher education institutions in England and Northern Ireland.

2. Overall approach

1. Do you have any comments on the proposal to maintain an overall continuity of approach with REF 2014, as outlined in paragraphs 10 and 23?

ECU welcomes the proposals to maintain continuity of the approach with REF 2014 in particular the principles of equity, equality and transparency. Anecdotal evidence provided by equality, diversity and inclusion practitioners to ECU highlights that while the equality requirements of REF 2014 were for some time consuming, this was primarily due to the requirements being implemented for the first time. We know from information provided in Athena SWAN applications that many institutions and their departments have embedded REF 2014 criteria for a reduction of outputs into their recruitment and promotions processes. Athena SWAN is a charter mark run by ECU.

This highlights that the impact of equality measures within REF need to be evaluated over the longer term as they have an ability to generate systemic change beyond the period of the REF. It also highlights that in its requirements, REF has an ability to establish new standards for expected practice in the sector in relation to equality and diversity.

3. Unit of assessment structure

2. What comments do you have about the Unit of Assessment structure in REF 2021?

ECU cannot comment on this area

4. Expert panels

3a. Do you agree that the submissions guidance and panel criteria should be developed simultaneously?

Yes

No

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Comments:

ECU agrees that development of the guidance on submissions and panel criteria simultaneously will result in a coherent and straightforward set of guidelines. In REF 2014 information on the equality requirements in relation to the research environment was limited in the Guidance on Submission. Further guidance was provided within the panel criteria but it was also limited and consequently, as highlighted by forthcoming research commissioned by HEFCE, information provided by institutions in the environment template in relation to equality primarily focused on Athena SWAN.

During REF 2014 Athena SWAN was only open to STEMM departments and focused on the advancement of women. The charter has since been expanded to cover all disciplines and now focuses on gender. Simultaneous development of the submissions guidance and panel criteria may have ensured a more rounded consideration of protected characteristics within the Equality Act 2010 in relation to the research environment in all subject areas.

3b. Do you support the later appointment of sub-panel members, near to the start of the assessment year?

Yes

No

Comments:

For the reasons outlined in paragraph 33 of the Consultation.

4. Do you agree with the proposed measures outlined at paragraph 35 for improving representativeness on the panels?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU welcomes the proposed measures for improving the representativeness of panels. However consideration should be given to introducing targets to increase the representation of women, black and minority ethnic (BME) and disabled people on panels. The UK funding bodies publication 'Analysis of panel membership' (2011) highlights that for REF 2014 panels, men comprised 67% of panel members and women 33%. At the time women held 40% of permanent academic positions. Asian staff comprised just 2% of panel members and yet held 6% of permanent academic positions

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at the time.

Having gender targets for gender representation would be in line with commitments made by RCUK:

'to agree and achieve appropriate minimum published targets for the under-represented gender on all advisory and peer review bodies and referee pools across the Councils. The overall target should be 30% of the under-represented gender across RCUK'. (see www.rcuk.ac.uk/documents/documents/actionplan2016-pdf).

Targets may need to vary by panel and sub panel as some units of assessment will have a high proportion of women whereas others will have a high proportion of men. Consequently, having a target of 40% women may not be a realistic ambition for some panels and sub panels nor a sufficiently challenging one for others. UK BME staff comprise 8.1% of permanent academic staff and Non UK BME staff comprise 24.1% permanent academic staff (2013/2014 HESA data from [Equality in Higher Education: statistical report 2016](#)). The representation of BME staff also varies significantly by subject areas and in some subjects including clinical dentistry, chemical engineering, civil engineering and anthropology and development studies there are more than 10% BME staff. Consequently, the appropriate target for each unit of assessment is also likely to vary in relation to BME staff.

SET subject areas currently have on average 3.4% and Non SET 4.5% staff who have declared a disability (ibid). Based on the occurrence of disability in wider society the percentage of disabled staff is likely to be far higher and the low rate of declaration is in part indicative of the fact that disabled staff do not feel comfortable declaring their impairment to their employer. In a couple of subject areas it would be appropriate to have a higher target than the average representation of disabled staff these are health and community studies and social work and social policy as disabled staff comprise more than 7% of all staff.

ECU understands that most panel members in REF 2014 were aged 45 and over and that this may be justified by the general level of experience expected of REF panel members but it may also be appropriate for the UK funding bodies to consider the number of opportunities for younger staff within panel membership. Indeed early career researchers as well as experienced researchers have produced research of the highest quality.

Staff from underrepresented groups may be called upon frequently to participate in externally facing work and that of HEIs committees particularly if they have reached a senior position. **Should targets be adopted consideration will need to be given to how contribution to the work of the panel is recognised within HEIs. Primarily, is the work considered in workload allocation and how is it recognised in relation to promotion and performance reviews? In their work, both HEIs and panels will need to be mindful of not over allocating responsibility to people from underrepresented groups.**

ECU recommends that targets are set for staff groups that were underrepresented on panels in REF 2014. The target could be set by main and subpanels in consultation with the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel. This should help to ensure that targets are realistic yet challenging and will help to ensure that underrepresented groups are not overburdened. The UK funding councils should not underestimate the ability of the REF to generate long term cultural change in the sector. On the basis of HEIs replicating REF 2014 provisions in their recruitment and promotions processes, it is likely that they will also replicate measures introduced for REF 2021 panels within their committee

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structures.

Targets are not the same as quotas and are an ambition for which action will need to be taken to achieve. The use of quotas may be appropriate but ECU recommends that the UK funding councils seek legal advice should they wish to explore their use. This is because the measures used to fill quotas may be considered positive discrimination which is not permitted under UK law. Having a target related to action to support underrepresented groups is likely to be considered positive action for which there are provisions within the Equality Act 2010.

Further information on the employment of staff by subject area and equality area can be found in ECU's publication Equality in Higher Education: Staff statistical report 2016 www.ecu.ac.uk/publications/equality-in-higher-education-statistical-report-2016/.

5a. Based on the options described at paragraphs 36 to 38, what approach do you think should be taken to nominating panel members?

ECU supports the proposal that the nominations approach used for REF 2014 is continued. An open nominations process may produce a wider pool of candidates but it will not necessarily result in a more diverse pool of candidates, particularly given the proposal that all nominations be accompanied by evidence to indicate the nomination is supported by the relevant subject community. If the subject community has not reflected on its representation and the need to encourage underrepresented groups, the usual suspects are likely to find it easier to gain support. Mentoring, coaching and leadership programmes targeting underrepresented groups are being widely used in the sector to enable participants to expand their networks and gain confidence challenging the status quo as well as skills to progress. However, if the system does not change, the impact of such initiatives will be limited.

5b. Do you agree with the proposal to require nominating bodies to provide equality and diversity information?

Yes

No

Comments:

As highlighted in the consultation document 'a requirement for nominating bodies to complete a structured form requesting information such as the E&D characteristics of the membership and how E&D was taken into account when selecting nominees. Such an approach is likely to ensure much greater account is taken of equality and diversity issues in the nominations process.'

In addition, ECU recommends that guidance is provided to subject communities and professional bodies on collecting data on equality characteristics, considering equality and diversity and the actions they can take to ensure diverse nominations for REF 2021 and in future. Guidance relating to the collection of equality data is particularly important given that data relating a number of protected characteristics

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under the Equality Act are considered personal sensitive information under the Data Protection Act.

6. Please comment on any additions or amendments to the list of nominating bodies, provided alongside the consultation document.

The Disability Rights Commission no longer exists.

5. Staff

7. Do you have any comments on the proposal to use HESA cost centres to map research-active staff to UOAs and are there any alternative approaches that should be considered?

ECU cannot comment on this area.

8. What comments do you have on the proposed definition of 'research-active' staff described in paragraph 43?

ECU is aware that many HEIs have reported that they will encounter difficulties using HESA staff activity codes, particularly HEIs in Scotland.

Given game playing in previous exercises to determine research quality one can assume that there is likely to be game playing in REF 2021 where there is scope. Any system to determine eligibility that is based on staff contract type will need take into consideration that staff contracts can be changed. In relation to gender, women academic staff are already more likely to be on teaching only contracts than men (30.4% in comparison to 22.7%) and teaching and research contracts (43.5% in comparison to 53%). While more women than men are employed on research only contracts (25.3% in comparison to 23.5%), more men are employed on academic contracts than women and men comprise the majority of research only staff (59.8%).

UK funding bodies data shows that in REF 2014, 67 per cent of men were selected, compared with 51 per cent of women. Disabled staff also had a lower selection rate than their nondisabled peers and Black and Asian UK and non-EU nationals had statistically significant lower selection rates, even when modelling for other factors was taken into account. (Selection of staff for inclusion in REF 2014, HEFCE: 2015)

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On the basis of selection rates from previous exercises, ECU expects that any contract changes as a result of REF 2021 criteria are more likely to affect women than men, more disabled than non-disabled staff and more BME staff from specific groups than others. Analyses of HESA data may help to identify the impact of REF 2021 contract criteria for inclusion but it may be difficult to separate the impact of the REF from the impact of the Teaching Excellence Framework, particularly in England where the majority of institutions are expected to participate.

9. With regard to the issues raised in relation to decoupling staff and outputs, what comments do you have on:

9a. The proposal to require an average of two outputs per full-time equivalent staff returned?

ECU cannot comment on the average number of outputs that each staff member be required to submit. **ECU recommends that in the event that an average number of outputs is determined, factors beyond FTE are considered to prevent inadvertent discrimination occurring.** While a calculation of FTE average would certainly enable units of assessment to make adjustments for part-time working, maternity leave, shared parental leave and early career researchers, it will not enable adequate consideration of complex circumstances resulting in a negative impact on staff affected.

What guidance will be provided to units of assessment on how to determine if an individual staff member should submit the maximum or minimum number of outputs? How much scope is there for selectivity beyond FTE in relation to the number of outputs submitted? For example, can units of assessment consider research quality? What equality guidance will be provided to units of assessment? What consideration would be given to ensuring scrutiny where no outputs are returned for individuals? The process for determining the number of outputs beyond FTE will need to be transparent to ensure that inadvertent discrimination does not occur and that there is fair allocation of research funding.

In REF 2014, while FTE was considered to determine the number of outputs, it was considered alongside other factors as the UK funding bodies recognised that an element of judgement was required for complex circumstances. A number of the cases considered by the REF 2014 Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) were borderline in relation to FTE calculations alone.

'The panel generally sought to equate any months absent and other constraints on an individuals' research work to the tariff for clearly defined reductions; and applied judgement to boundary cases as appropriate. We recognised the potential additional impact of multiple circumstances affecting an individual, and took due account of this when making recommendations'. (Equality and diversity in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework, HEFCE: 2015, page 8
www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref/content/equal/EDAP%20final%20report.pdf)

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9b. The maximum number of outputs for each staff member?

ECU recommends that if staff are required to submit more than one output, consideration will need to be given to a system to determine the number of outputs that can be returned. Failure to do so could result in inadvertent discrimination. While a calculation of FTE average would certainly enable units of assessment to make adjustments for part-time working, maternity leave, shared parental leave and early career researchers, it will not enable adequate consideration of complex circumstances resulting in a negative impact on staff affected. If complex circumstances are not considered, there could be a negative impact on equality where research careers may now be determined by how many outputs you are allowed to submit as opposed to whether or not you were submitted.

9c. Setting a minimum requirement of one for each staff member?

ECU agrees with the proposal to submit a minimum requirement of one output per staff members as it will ensure that all staff are returned. Having a system whereby all research active staff are eligible yet they do not all have to submit one output negates Lord Stern's intention that all staff are included.

10. What are your comments on the issues described in relation to portability of outputs, specifically:

10a. Is acceptance for publication a suitable marker to identify outputs that an institution can submit and how would this apply across different output types?

ECU cannot comment on this.

10b. What challenges would your institution face in verifying the eligibility of outputs?

ECU cannot comment on this.

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10c. Would non-portability have a negative impact on certain groups and how might this be mitigated?

Non-portability of outputs would have more of an impact on academics under the age of 35 who are more likely to be on fixed term contracts than academic staff over the age of 35. 81% of academic staff under the age of 25, 71% between the ages of 26 – 30 and 50.5% between the ages of 31 – 35 are on fixed term contracts. The percentage then falls to below 33% until the 66 plus age group in which 49.8% of academic staff are on fixed term contracts. **Consequently, the proposal has a negative impact on age equality.**

64.7% of all academic contracts are permanent/open ended. Of those contracts, men hold 56.7% of them and women 43.3%. Indeed, 37.8% of women academics are on fixed term contracts in comparison to 33.3% of male academics. ECU has looked at contract type, gender and age and the highest percentage of women employed on an academic contract is within the 31-35 (16.5%) age group. **Consequently, the proposal is likely to have a negative impact on women. There may be a correlation between contract type, age and gender.**

Similar figures in relation to ethnicity also highlight that more BME staff (34.4%) are on fixed term contracts than non BME staff (30.3%). ECU has not undertaken analysis of contract type by age and BME status but it has undertaken analysis by BME status and age. The percentage of BME people employed in the higher education sector is higher in the under 40 age categories. **Consequently, the proposal may also have a negative impact on BME staff.**

Any solution would need to take into consideration age and the contract type of staff not just whether or not a staff member is an early career researcher.

10d. What comments do you have on sharing outputs proportionally across institutions?

ECU cannot comment on this.

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11. Do you support the introduction of a mandatory requirement for the Open Researcher and Contributor ID to be used as the staff identifier, in the event that information about individual staff members continues to be collected in REF 2021?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU supports the use of staff identifiers where they can help gain a better understanding of outcomes by equality characteristics.

12. What comments do you have on the proposal to remove Category C as a category of eligible staff?

ECU cannot comment on this question

13. What comments do you have on the definition of research assistants?

ECU cannot comment on this question

14. What comments do you have on the proposal for staff on fractional contracts and is a minimum of 0.2 FTE appropriate?

ECU supports the approach outlined and a minimum of 0.2 FTE. Some staff may have opted for contracts of 0.2 FTE for reasons relating to equality.

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6. Collaboration

15. What are your comments in relation to better supporting collaboration between academia and organisations beyond higher education in REF 2021?

ECU cannot comment on this question

7. Outputs

16. Do you agree with the proposal to allow the submission of a reserve output in cases where the publication of the preferred output will postdate the submission deadline?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

17. What are your comments in relation to the assessment of interdisciplinary research in REF 2021?

ECU cannot comment on this question

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18. Do you agree with the proposal for using quantitative data to inform the assessment of outputs, where considered appropriate for the discipline? If you agree, have you any suggestions for data that could be provided to the panels at output and aggregate level?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU welcomes the conclusion that metrics should not replace peer review as the primary approach to the assessment in REF 2021. In its response to Lord Stern's review of the REF ECU highlighted the risks of both peer review and metrics from an equality perspective. ECU welcomes the higher education funding bodies' commitment to providing unconscious bias training in addition to equality and diversity briefings to REF panels.

8. Impact

19. Do you agree with the proposal to maintain consistency where possible with the REF 2014 impact assessment process?

Yes

No

Comments:

20. What comments do you have on the recommendation to broaden and deepen the definition of impact?

ECU recommends that the definition of impact is expanded to specifically mention equality. Equality is not just about the diversity of the research team but considerations of equality in the development of research itself. All too often research, development and design are undertaken without the consideration of equality and this has significant implications for society (Rees¹). The

¹ Rees (date unknown) Mainstreaming Gender in Research: Lessons from Europe
<https://eng.kuleuven.be/gelijkekansen/t-rees-mainstreaming-gender.pdf>

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website Gendered Innovations² highlights examples of the importance of equality considerations in research design. For example, research into assistive technology for older people needs to consider the different needs of men and women as they age. Research on the impact of environmental chemicals has to date primarily focussed on the reproductive health of men and yet it is a key issue for women too. The implications of not considering equality in research development also has an impact on disabled people, the most commonly cited area being human geography, in particular town planning and transportation.

The need to consider the gender dimension in research has now been built into European funding programmes including Horizon 2020. Including equality within the definition may help to ensure that UK research continues to be world class and leading.

¹ Rees (date unknown) Mainstreaming Gender in Research: Lessons from Europe
<https://eng.kuleuven.be/gelijkekansen/t-rees-mainstreaming-gender.pdf>

² <https://genderedinnovations.stanford.edu/>

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21. Do you agree with the proposal for the funding bodies and Research Councils UK to align their definition of academic and wider impact?

- Yes
- No

If yes, what comments do you have on the proposed definitions?

22. What comments do you have on the criteria of reach and significance?

ECU cannot comment on this question

23. What do you think about having further guidance for public engagement impacts and what do you think would be helpful?

ECU cannot comment on this question

24. Do you agree with the proposal that impacts should remain eligible for submission by the institution or institutions in which the underpinning research has been conducted?

- Yes
- No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

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25. Do you agree that the approach to supporting and enabling impact should be captured as an explicit section of the environment element of the assessment?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

26. What comments do you have on the suggested approaches to determining the required number of case studies? Are there alternative approaches that merit consideration?

ECU cannot comment on this question

27. Do you agree with the proposal to include a number of mandatory fields in the impact case study template to support the assessment and audit process better (paragraph 96)?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

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28. What comments do you have on the inclusion of further optional fields in the impact case study template?

ECU cannot comment on this question

29. What comments do you have in relation to the inclusion of examples of impact arising from research activity and bodies of work, as well as from specific research outputs?

ECU cannot comment on this question

30. Do you agree with the proposed timeframe for the underpinning research activity (1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020)?

- Yes
- No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

31. What are your views on the suggestion that the threshold criterion for underpinning research, research activity or a body of work should be based on standards of rigour? Do you have suggestions for how rigour could be assessed?

ECU cannot comment on this question

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32. Evaluation of REF 2014 found that provision of impact evidence was challenging for HEIs and panels. Do you have any comments on the following:

32a. The suggestion to provide audit evidence to the panels?

ECU cannot comment on this question

32b. The development of guidelines for the use and standard of quantitative data as evidence for impact?

ECU cannot comment on this question

32c. Do you have any other comments on evidencing impacts in REF 2021?

No

33. What are your views on the issues and rules around submitting examples of impact in REF 2021 that were returned in REF 2014?

ECU cannot comment on this question

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9. Environment

34a. Do you agree with the proposal to change the structure of the environment template by introducing more quantitative data into this aspect of the assessment?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

34b. Do you have suggestions of data already held by institutions that would provide panels with a valuable insight into the research environment?

ECU's Athena SWAN Charter was widely cited in the research environment template. Since REF 2014 Athena SWAN has been expanded to cover gender, intersectionality between gender and other equality areas and all subject areas as well as research institutes. ECU has also launched a Race Equality Charter. Both institutions and departments frequently cite ECU's charter marks as evidence of good practice. To achieve an award institutions are required to submit a range of quantitative and qualitative data and commit to taking ongoing action. The viability of data and the feasibility and relevance of the actions in relation to the data is then scrutinised by peer review.

Other equality recognition schemes include Disability Confident, Stonewall, Race for Opportunity, Working Families and Opportunity Now. While ECU welcomes the recognition that our Athena SWAN charter as well as our Race Equality Charter and other recognition schemes play an important part in promoting equality, it is important that participation in these schemes remain voluntary. It is also important to recognise that schemes are not in place for all of the protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010 and areas covered by equality legislation in Northern Ireland. Welsh language requirements were also covered by the equality considerations in REF 2014.

In addition to asking for evidence of equality charters and benchmarking awards, institutions could also be asked to provide information on their equality work under the specific duties of the Public Sector Equality Duty of the Equality Act to improve the research environment for all staff. In Northern Ireland, the equivalent is section 75. This will help to ensure that all equality areas, are considered in the research environment.

35. Do you have any comment on the ways in which the environment element can give more recognition to universities' collaboration beyond higher education?

ECU cannot comment on this question

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36. Do you agree with the proposals for providing additional credit to units for open access?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

37. What comments do you have on ways to incentivise units to share and manage their research data more effectively?

ECU cannot comment on this question

10. Institutional level assessment

38. What are your views on the introduction of institutional-level assessment of impact and environment?

Reporting on some dimensions of the REF at the institutional level may make the process of REF assessment simpler. However, higher education institutions are diverse in their research, expertise, geography and cultures and assessment at the institutional level is unlikely to be fully reflective of their diversity. REF 2014 required each submitting unit to evidence how it promotes equality and diversity as part of the description of the research environment. Equality was one element of the Environment Template but it is a key element:

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'An organisation's success and competitiveness depends on its ability to embrace diversity and draw on the skills, understanding and experience of its people. The potential rewards of diversity are significant: recruiting staff from the widest possible pool will unlock talent and make a major contribution to the impact of research and will benefit the economic and social wellbeing of the UK.' (Research Council's UK Expectations for Equality and Diversity³)

Through our work in running the Athena SWAN Charter we are aware of the differences in gender equality across subject areas within institutions. Successfully applying for an institutional award does not automatically equate to successful departmental applications. On this basis ECU does not recommend an assessment of equality at the institutional level only.

Consideration could be given to the research environment at the unit of assessment level but equality elements could be assessed through a range of means. For example, Research Councils UK list equality awards that both institutions and departments can join to demonstrate their work on and commitment to equality. ECU's awards are listed along with Investors in People, Disability Standard, Stonewall and Project Juno. However, having or working towards an award should not be a prerequisite, it is just one method for demonstrating commitment. As mentioned above departments could be asked how they are implementing their institutions commitments under the public sector equality duty of the Equality Act 2010.

39. Do you have any comments on the factors that should be considered when piloting an institutional-level assessment?

Should the UK funding bodies proceed with institutional level of assessment only, ECU recommends that employment practices which promote equality for the protected characteristics within the public sector equality duty of the Equality Act – age, disability, gender reassignment, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion and belief, sex and sexual orientation – and additional characteristics within Welsh and Northern Irish legislation all require consideration in relation to institutions' diversity strategies. Focusing on gender alone is not sufficient. This may prove challenging for some HEI's in England as due to the requirements of the specific duties for England, their work to fulfil the public sector equality duty will not necessarily cover all protected characteristics in relation to both staff and students.

11. Outcomes and weighting

40. What comments do you have on the proposed approach to creating the overall quality profile for each submission?

ECU cannot comment on this question

³ www.rcuk.ac.uk/RCUK-prod/assets/documents/skills/EqualityStatement.pdf

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41. Given the proposal that the weighting for outputs remain at 65 per cent, do you agree that the overall weighting for impact should remain at 20 per cent?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

42. Do you agree with the proposed split of the weightings between the institutional and submission-level elements of impact and environment?

Yes

No

Comments:

ECU cannot comment on this question

12. Proposed timetable for REF 2021

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43. What comments do you have on the proposed timetable for REF 2021?

ECU cannot comment on this question

13. Other

44. Are there proposals not referred to above, or captured in your response so far, that you feel should be considered? If so, what are they and what is the rationale for their inclusion?

No

14. Contact details

If you would be happy to be contacted in the event of any follow-up questions, please provide a contact email address.

Ellen.pugh@ecu.ac.uk