

REF 2021 Guidance on Submissions

Part 3 Section 3: Impact (REF3)

Definition of impact for the REF

297. For the purposes of the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.

298. Impact **includes**, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals
- in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally.

299. Impact **includes** the reduction or prevention of harm, risk, cost or other negative effects.

300. For the purposes of the impact element of the REF:

- a. Academic impacts on research or the advancement of academic knowledge (whether in the UK or internationally) are **excluded**. (The submitted unit's contribution to academic research and knowledge is assessed within the 'outputs' and 'environment' elements of REF.)
- b. Impacts on students, teaching or other activities both within and/or beyond the submitting HEI are **included**. The 'Panel criteria' (paragraphs 301 to 302) sets out the panels' expectations for impact in this area.

301. Impacts will be assessed in terms of their 'reach and significance' regardless of the geographic location in which they occurred, whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally. The UK funding bodies expect that many impacts will contribute to the economy, society and culture within the UK, but equally value the international contribution of UK research.

302. The 'Panel criteria' provides further guidance in relation to how the panels will assess the case studies against the criteria of reach and significance and the kinds of impact that the panels would anticipate from research across the UOAs; this guidance is not restrictive, and any impact that meets the general definition in Annex C will be eligible.

Submission requirements for impact

303. The REF aims to assess the impact of excellent research undertaken within each submitted unit. This will be evidenced by specific examples of impacts that have been underpinned by research undertaken within the unit over a period of time. The focus of the assessment is the impact of the submitted unit's research, not the impact of individuals or

individual research outputs, although they may contribute to the evidence of the submitted unit's impact.

304. Each submission must include **impact case studies (REF3)** describing specific impacts that have occurred during the assessment period (1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020) that were underpinned by excellent research undertaken in the submitted unit. The underpinning research must have been produced by the submitting HEI during the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020¹.

305. Panels will assess all the evidence provided in the submitted case studies (REF3), and will form an impact sub-profile for each submission. Panels will apply their expert judgement based on all the information provided in the impact case studies, before confirming the impact sub-profiles.

306. When writing case studies, submitting units should refer to the guidelines for presenting quantitative data set out in the 'Guidelines for standardising quantitative indicators of impact within REF case studies' (available at www.ref.ac.uk under Guidance). These guidelines have been developed to enable more consistent presentation of quantitative evidence in case studies, both to better inform the panels' assessment and to enable more effective analysis of the case studies post-REF 2021 by the funding bodies and other stakeholders.

Impact case studies that include confidential information

307. The following arrangements are in place to enable institutions to submit case studies that include confidential information, with the agreement of the relevant organisation(s):

- a. All panel members, assessors, observers and the panel secretariat are bound by confidentiality arrangements. The current confidentiality and data security arrangements are included in the 'Panel criteria'. Panel members' obligations during the assessment phase will be expanded on, to include specific arrangements for their treatment of confidential or sensitive information in submissions. These expanded arrangements will be published in advance of the submission deadline.
- b. Where there are main or sub-panel members or assessors who HEIs believe would have a conflict of interest in assessing specific case studies, HEIs can identify these when making submissions, and the case studies will not be made available to such individuals.
- c. When making submissions, HEIs can identify specific case studies that either should not be published at all due to their confidential nature, or that should be redacted prior to publication. HEIs will need to provide redacted versions suitable for publication by 29 January 2021. Submitted case studies identified as 'not for publication' or the elements for 'redaction' will be destroyed by the REF team once no longer required for assessment purposes.

¹ The end of the period for the underpinning research (31 December 2020) extends beyond the end of the period for the impact (31 July 2020). This is to align with the end of the publication period for outputs, and recognises that research may have had impact prior to the publication of the outputs.

- d. To protect panel members from potentially inappropriate exposure to intellectual property, sub-panel chairs may identify specific panel members who should not have access to, or should have access only to the redacted versions of, specific case studies that include commercially sensitive information.

308. In addition to the general arrangements set out in paragraph 307 above, there may be specific instances where research has had impacts of a sensitive nature where the material to be included in a case study could only be made available for assessment to individuals with national security vetting clearance. This may relate to the underpinning research, the nature of the impact, or both. The following arrangements apply, to enable the submission of such specific cases:

- a. The submitting HEI must request advance permission from the REF director to submit such case studies, by providing outline information about the broad nature of the research and/or impact, the level of sensitivity of the intended material, and the level of clearance required of individuals to whom the full case study could be made available. There will be three staggered deadlines for requests in May, September and December 2019.
- b. Permission will be granted to submit such case studies where the REF director considers, having consulted the relevant panel chairs, that:
 - i. the confidentiality arrangements outlined in paragraph 307 above are insufficient to enable the institution to submit the case study in the normal way for assessment by the panel **and**
 - ii. it is practicable to identify existing panellists or appoint additional assessors who have the appropriate clearance and expertise, and do not have direct conflicts of interest, to assess the material.
- c. Where permission is granted, arrangements will be made for the HEI to make the case study available securely to the appropriate panel members/assessors. Only the outline information will be made available to the panel and no details about these case studies will be published.
- d. HEIs should allow sufficient time for such case studies to go through the relevant organisation's internal release processes.

Number of case studies in a submission

309. The number of case studies required in each submission will be determined by the number (FTE) of Category A submitted staff returned in the submission, as set out in Table 1. If a submission includes fewer than the required number of case studies, a grade of unclassified will be awarded to each required case study that is not submitted. Submissions may not include more than the required number of case studies.

Table 1: Number of case studies required in submissions

Number of Category A submitted staff submitted (FTE)	Required number of case studies
Up to 19.99	2
20 to 34.99	3
35 to 49.99	4
50 to 64.99	5
65 to 79.99	6
80 to 94.99	7
95 to 109.99	8
110 to 159.99	9
160 or more	10, plus one further case study per additional 50 FTE

310. Submissions will **not** be expected to provide impact case studies that are representative of the spread of research activity across the whole submitted unit. Institutions should select the strongest examples of impact that are underpinned by the submitted unit's excellent research, and should explain within the environment template (REF5b) how the selected case studies relate to the submitted unit's approach to enabling impact from its research.

Eligibility definitions for case studies

311. Each case study must provide details of a specific impact or impacts that:

- a. meets the definition of impact for the REF in Annex C
- b. occurred during the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020 (see paragraph 312)
- c. was underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting unit in the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 (see paragraphs 318 to 320).

312. Case studies must describe impacts that occurred specifically within the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020. The impacts may have been at any stage of development or maturity during this period, so long as some effect, change or benefit meeting the definition of impact in Annex C took place during that period. This may include, for example, impacts at an early stage, or impacts that may have started prior to 1 August 2013 but continued into the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020. Case studies will be assessed in terms of the reach and significance of the impact that occurred only during the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020, and not in terms of any impact prior to this period or potential future or anticipated impact after this period.

313. More than one submitted unit (within the same HEI and/or in different HEIs) may include the same impact within their respective case studies, so long as **each** submitted unit produced excellent research that made a distinct and material contribution to the impact. In such cases, units may provide common descriptions of the impact arising, where they so wish.

Impact case studies continued from REF 2014

314. All impact case studies submitted in REF 2021 must meet the same eligibility criteria, including the length of the window for underpinning research and the assessment period for the impact described (see paragraph 311). Where they meet these eligibility criteria, case studies continued from examples submitted in 2014 will be eligible for submission in REF 2021

315. Submitting units will be required to identify continued case studies in the case study template. This information will be made available to sub-panels and will be used by the funding bodies in post-assessment evaluations. The 'Panel criteria' (paragraphs 292 to 295) sets out further information about the main panels' expectations in relation to receiving continued case studies.

316. Case studies will be considered to be continued if **both**:

- a. the body of underpinning research is the same as described in a 2014 case study. This should not be understood solely in relation to the referenced outputs, but means that the continued case study does not describe any new research having taken place since the previous case study that has made a distinct and material contribution to the impact **and**
- b. there is significant overlap in the impact described, so that the impact types and beneficiaries are broadly the same as described in the 2014 case study.

317. A case study will be considered new where additional underpinning research has taken place since that described in the previous case study, which has made a distinct and material contribution to the impact, and/or the impact types or beneficiaries have changed.

Underpinning research

318. To be eligible for assessment as an impact, the impact described in a case study must have been underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitting unit, during the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020 (see footnote 1). Underpinning research may be a body of work produced over a number of years or may be the output(s) of a particular project. It may be produced by one or more individuals.

319. Each case study must describe the underpinning research, include references to one or more key research outputs, provide evidence of the quality of that research, and explain how that research underpinned or contributed to the impact. Further guidance on the information required in case studies is in Annex G. The following definitions apply:

- a. 'Research produced by the submitting unit in the period 1 January 2000 to 31 December 2020' means that staff carried out research within the scope of the relevant UOA descriptor, while working in the submitting HEI (even if those staff have since left). This research must be evidenced by outputs referenced in the case study, first made publicly available between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2020. The staff may, but need not, have been submitted to a previous RAE/REF or to the

current REF. The research outputs may, but need not, have been submitted to a previous RAE/REF or to the current REF.

- i. Research by staff 'working in the submitting HEI' may include research undertaken by staff who would be considered 'Category C' (defined in paragraphs **Error! Reference source not found.** to **Error! Reference source not found.**), on the basis that their research was clearly focused in the submitting HEI. It may include research undertaken by staff employed on non-Category A eligible contracts. The individuals need not be working in the submitting HEI on the census date but must have been at the time they carried out the underpinning research.
 - ii. Research undertaken solely by research students is **not** considered as having been carried out by staff while working in the submitting HEI.
 - iii. Provided the underpinning research is within the scope of the UOA in which the case study is submitted, a case study may be submitted in a different UOA from the individual who carried out the underpinning research.
 - iv. If staff employed by the submitting HEI on the census date conducted all of the research underpinning an impact before joining the institution, the submitting HEI may not submit the impact of this research. (In this case, the institution where the staff conducted the research may submit the impact.)
- b. 'Excellent research' means that the quality of the research is at least equivalent to two star: 'quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour'. Each case study must include references to one or more research outputs that best illustrate the research underpinning the impact and were produced by the submitting HEI, and evidence of the quality of the research as requested in the 'Panel criteria'. Underpinning research outputs may include the full range of output types listed in the output glossary (Annex K) and are not limited to printed academic work. Panels will consider the evidence of research quality, and may review outputs referenced in a case study. A panel will grade a case study as unclassified if it judges that the underpinning research as a whole was not of at least two-star quality.
- c. 'Underpinned by' means that the research made a distinct and material contribution to the impact taking place, such that the impact would not have occurred or would have been significantly reduced without the contribution of that research. The relationship between research and impact can be indirect or non-linear (for example, co-produced research). Each case study must explain how (through what means) the research led to or contributed to the impact, and include appropriate sources of information external to the HEI to corroborate these claims (see Annex G). Where the panel judges that the submitted unit's research did not make a distinct and material contribution to the impact, the case study will be graded as unclassified.

320. Where a submitting HEI is the result of a merger between former HEIs, the submitting HEI can submit impacts from the research undertaken by the former, now merged, HEIs.

321. Where a submitting HEI has taken over a research unit – whether from another HEI or from elsewhere – the submitting HEI can submit impacts from research that was undertaken by the absorbed unit before it became part of the submitting HEI, with prior agreement from the relevant UK funding body.

322. Prior agreement must be sought by providing details of the nature of the research unit and of when and how it became part of the submitting HEI, to info@ref.ac.uk, no later than 30 June 2020. The REF team will liaise with the relevant funding body and communicate the decision to the HEI.

323. In each case, the funding bodies will take into consideration whether a distinct unit was absorbed by the submitting HEI in its entirety, and the extent to which there has been genuine structural change.

324. For clarity, these arrangements do not apply to impacts from research carried out by individuals before they joined the submitting HEI. See paragraph 319.a.iv.

325. There are many ways in which research may have underpinned impact, including but not limited to:

- a. Research that contributed directly or indirectly to an impact. For example, a submitted unit's research may have informed research in another submitted unit (whether in the same or another HEI), which in turn led to an impact. In this case, both submitted units may show that their research made a distinct and material contribution to the impact.
- b. Bodies of work produced over a number of years, or in the output(s) of a particular project, conducted by one or more individuals, teams or groups, within one or more submitted units that led to or underpinned an impact. More than one submitted unit (within the same HEI or in different HEIs) may include the same impact within their respective case studies, so long as each submitted unit produced excellent research that made a distinct and material contribution to the impact.
- c. Impacts on, for example, public awareness, attitudes, understanding or behaviour that arose from engaging the public with research. In these cases, the submitting unit must show that the engagement activity was, at least in part, based on the submitted unit's research and drew materially and distinctly upon it. Further guidance and examples are set out in the 'Panel criteria', Annex A.
- d. Researchers that impacted on others through the provision of professional advice or expert testimony. In such a case, the submitting unit must show that the researcher's appointment to their advisory role, or the specific advice given, was at least in part based on the submitted unit's research and drew materially and distinctly upon it.

- e. Research that led to impact through its deliberate exploitation by the HEI or through its exploitation by others. The submitting HEI need not have been involved in exploiting the research, but must show that its research made a distinct and material contribution to the impact.

326. Institutions must submit impact case studies in the appropriate UOAs. Impacts from research undertaken at the submitting HEI may be submitted either in the REF UOA that relates to the underpinning research, or, if this differs, to the REF UOA that relates to the staff who conducted the research.

Case study data requirements (form REF3)

327. Submitting units are required to submit case studies using a generic template. The template, annotated with guidance, is in Annex G. The template has been developed following REF 2014 with the addition of the following required fields to enable submitting units in all UOAs to provide key information about the eligibility of the case study:

- institution
- unit of assessment
- title of case study
- period when the underpinning research was undertaken (within the eligible timeframe)
- names and roles (for example, job titles) of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit ('role' at time when the underpinning research was conducted)
- period when staff involved in the underpinning research were employed by the submitting HEI
- period when the claimed impact occurred
- whether the case study is continued from a case study submitted in 2014.

328. The remaining sections of the template will allow HEIs to clearly explain and demonstrate the impact of their research through a narrative that includes indicators and evidence as appropriate to the case being made, and in a format that is suitable for panels to assess them.

329. In addition, submitting units are required to complete, where applicable, the following additional contextual data fields. This information will enable research funders to track and evaluate the impact of their funding. It will not be provided to the panels and will not form part of the five-page limit for impact case studies:

- name(s) of funder(s)
- Global Research Identifier of funder(s): <https://www.grid.ac/>
- name(s) of funding programme(s)
- grant number(s)

- amount of grant (in GBP (Sterling))
- ORCID for each named researcher, where held
- name(s) of formal partner(s)
- country/countries where the impact occurred.

The information provided in these fields will facilitate the use and analysis of case studies following the end of the exercise, rather than in the assessment process itself, and the data will not be routinely provided to the panels.

330. Institutions are required to provide to the REF team the corroborating evidence for submitted impact case studies by 29 January 2021.

331. We will collect, store and process all personal data submitted by HEIs to the REF in accordance with current data protection legislation – the General Data Protection Regulation (EU) 2016/679 and the Data Protection Act 2018. The evidence will be held by the REF team on the secure submission system and will not be routinely provided to the sub-panels. Where requested, information will be shared via a secure system with panel chairs, members, assessors, panel secretariat and observers, who are all bound by confidentiality arrangements. The information will be used to corroborate the claims made in the impact case studies and will not be anonymised. Personal data will be retained until the end of the assessment period and will be destroyed in December 2021.

332. The onus is on submitting units to provide appropriate evidence within each case study of the particular impact claimed. The REF panels provide guidance in the ‘Panel criteria’ about the kinds of evidence and indicators of impact they would consider appropriate to research in their respective UOAs, but this guidance is not exhaustive.

333. HEIs may submit corroborating evidence in any language. If the corroborating evidence is a pre-existing document not available in English, the HEI should return the document in its original language and state what language it is in. The REF team will use the expertise of specialist advisers with the relevant language skills, if corroboration through these sources is required.

334. Corroborating contacts should be given only for people who the REF team can communicate with in English.

335. The information provided in an impact case study may be presented in any form the institution considers to be appropriate. This may include tables and non-text content (for example, diagrams, images), so long as the guidance on maximum page limits and minimum font size, line spacing and margin widths are adhered to.

336. Institutions may include URLs in REF3 only for the purpose of verifying or corroborating claims made in the submission. Panels will not follow URLs to access additional evidence or information to supplement the submission.