

## REF Review Working Group – Final Recommendations

V7 March 2022

*Lettie Bishop, Angela Crawford, Sophie Crouchman, Jen Fensome (co-Chair), M.N. Ravishankar, Stephen Rice (co-Chair), Adrian Spencer, Thomas Tufte, Claire Warden, supported by Gillian Collard and Tom Williams*

### Introduction

The REF Review Working Group was convened with a remit to gather information and views from a broad range of staff across the University about their experiences of developing the REF2021 submission, and to compile suggestions about how to better plan for the next REF. The Working Group consisted of both academic and professional services staff, with a Co-Chair from each community, and representatives of ADRs, ADEs and UoA Teams from across different disciplines, as well as REO and Planning (as the Services most involved with the process). The Working Group agreed that focus groups organised for staff with similar roles and a cross-University online survey with anonymised results, would offer a mixture of engagement opportunities for staff wishing to provide input. These initiatives ran from June to October 2021. This document outlines the main findings of the Working Group activity and includes recommendations arising from our reflections.

### Review Methodology

We conducted 16 focus groups that were attended by 110 staff (52% male, 48% female) from all PS Teams involved in REF and from Loughborough's 9 schools and 16 UoAs, including a mix of job families and grades. The 16 focus groups comprised of: PVCs & APVC; ALT; RDMs and PDMs (REO); ADEs; PSLT; ICS authors (x2); UoA output assessors (x2); UoA leads (including ADRs); Planning (x2); the Library; the Research Quality & Visibility team (REO); School administration teams; and REF panel members.

In addition, we received 110 responses to an online survey with 100 colleagues consenting to us making use of personal data to evaluate the characteristics of the respondents. 83% were RTE staff, 16% were PS staff and 1% (1 respondent) was SSA(R). 34% were female compared with 42% for the whole University, 8% were BAME, compared with 21% for the University and 3% declared a disability compared with 4% for the University. These initial data suggest that we captured the views of a relatively diverse population, but that female and BAME colleagues were under-represented relative to the whole population. Where survey respondents consented, data on protected characteristics was added to the survey results data, allowing questions to be analysed by these characteristics to establish whether they had any bearing on the answers given. However, due to the small numbers of staff in certain groups (e.g., staff with a disability) and the small number of respondents for some questions, analyses are limited. But the analysis did identify differences between groups defined by protected characteristics in relation to overall satisfaction with the submission process, the timelines for production of ICS and environment statements, and the reception of communications. These findings are considered under Recommendation 4.

The recommendations that follow reflect the views expressed during the focus groups and in the written commentaries gathered via the online survey, supported by quantitative data from the survey. Views were diverse, which we have tried to accommodate, but the recommendations inevitably reflect headline findings based on the frequency and strength with which positive, critical, and sometimes contradictory, comments were made. The findings of the REF Equality Assessment exercise and some REF panellist information that we have gathered so far, also inform these recommendations for the next REF in 2028.

## Overview

There was broad consensus that:

- REF systems, processes and management served the University well; 90% of respondents who did not remain neutral (n = 75), felt that REF preparations added value to the underlying raw material to make submissions as strong as possible.
- Leadership and organisation of REF processes was widely praised for its fair and effective governance, good communication and excellent support.
- The inclusive approach to returning eligible staff, positive and supportive management tone, and diligent, excellent work by many academic and Professional Service colleagues were viewed as significant positive factors.

These observations were tempered by views that:

- 32% of respondents who did not remain neutral (n= 75), disagreed that our research and impact work over the REF cycle provided us with the best possible material to build a high-quality submission.
- The submission process was overly dependent on the dedication and 'good will' of some staff.
- Some aspects of governance, communication, resourcing and technical support were problematic for some UoAs or PS teams some of the time.
- ICS identification, management and delivery was more widely thought to have been challenging, with comments to that effect from PVCs, Deans, ADRs and ADEs, Professional Service colleagues drafted in to help, and ICS authors.

## Recommendations

The recommendations below (1-10) are proposed against a backdrop of the following general principles:

- Loughborough should aim to retain its inclusive, collegiate and supportive approach to REF, which was widely welcomed and had a beneficial impact on the process and submission. Lessons from the REF Equality Impact Assessment (e.g., that female authors were under-represented in the pool of research outputs available for selection) should be addressed and EDI considerations prioritised in REF2028 activities.
- REF2028 preparations should begin soon. "Soon" is necessarily flexible to accommodate lessons from the initial analysis of REF2021 outcomes and the arrival of the new PVC(R&I), but we envisage establishment of REF leadership and governance, and initiation of activities in PS teams, Schools and UoA teams in AY 22-23. Activities that we already know will underpin a successful return (e.g., identification of likely ICS, ongoing output quality scoring, pursuit of appropriate IT systems, modifications to OA policy and processes) can begin immediately (and some are indeed underway).
- We should seek to formulate activities, processes and systems designed to enhance REF preparedness as part and parcel of a thriving Research and Innovation environment focused on generating excellence and as such, embed them within the everyday culture of the University. REF should remain a measure of our strategy's success rather than a driver of strategy and we should aim to make REF activity a regular element of good professional practice that helps generate high quality research and impact. REF activities should be underpinned by adequate recognition and by training/education of academic and PS staff so that expectations and rationale are clearly understood.
- Existing processes that support our research and impact ambitions, like QICR, must not be duplicated but complemented by any new activity. We should always have an eye on Project Enable and the need to reduce workload and increase capacity wherever possible.

## Specific Recommendations

### 1. Establish an APVC role

We recommend establishing a senior role with responsibility for supporting the PVC(R&I) in relation to REF2028. The role of the APVC REF was cited multiple times, including by the PVC(R), as having an essential impact on REF2021 preparations, particularly ICS delivery. The precise remit and scope of the role would need to be established with the new PVC(R&I). It could be broad (e.g., overseeing development and operationalisation of REF strategy including recommendations adopted from this report, lessons learned from analysis of REF2021 results, and intelligence from our REF panellists and elsewhere) or it could be focused (e.g., on generation of impact from research and ICS development). It is feasible that the role would be relatively small to begin with but grow closer to REF2028.

We believe such a role will signify the strategic importance of REF and its underlying principles, help to embed REF in University, School and PS operations, and improve the timeliness and quality of preparations. There is a balance to be struck against a perception that REF is driving rather than measuring research strategy, but we see the role as working to make activities that are beneficial for REF and inherently a part of good academic research, a measured and everyday part of Loughborough's research culture. Therefore, the role may or may not be called "APVC REF", but below we refer to it that way for simplicity. The role-holder would report to the PVC(R&I) and sit on Research Committee.

### 2. Establish the University's most likely UoA profile and make UoA membership an ongoing consideration.

The set of REF2028 UoAs Loughborough will return and the allocation of individuals to those UoAs needs to be flexible and allow optimisation of the whole-university return. **Early and ongoing consideration of the UoAs in Loughborough's 2028 return will facilitate efficient operation of REF activities.**

The volume and panel requirements of UoAs vary substantially so that the activities and resource needs of different UoAs were different in REF2021 and are likely to be different again in REF2028. This should be explicit in the planning done by service providers and Schools and requires central systems to be flexible and adaptive to specific UoA needs. For example, the size of UoA teams should be appropriate for the number of ICS and outputs being returned.

**Schools should be mindful of colleagues whose UoA allocation may not be straightforward and work with them early in the cycle to resolve which UoA they are most likely to return to.** 19% of survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that staff were allocated to UoAs in a timely, effective, high-quality manner. Comments pointed out the benefits of early allocation, including reducing uncertainty for staff and the provision of time to make it feasible for staff to adapt to a specific UoA; for example, in their publication strategy. Schools should approach this carefully to avoid REF strategy defining colleagues' research and impact activity, and must maintain flexibility in their management of staff expectations sufficient to accommodate changes in UoA guidance or School strategy.

### 3. Clarify roles, decision-making responsibilities, and cross-School structures to support REF2028 activities

Within Schools, it will be beneficial to clearly define one or more individuals who have responsibility for key REF activities in relation to each UoA, including the identification and development of ICS, output quality scoring, collating research environment data and monitoring progress against REF2021 strategic intentions.

Schools have different management structures and numbers of UoAs to manage, so they should have flexibility to establish these roles within or without existing governance structures. They need not be new roles, but it is important that there is clear understanding of who is responsible for what. While it will be important that the ADR&I has oversight across their school, other individuals may also be involved, reporting up to the ADR&I. In any permutation some continuity will be essential to ensure that learning is not lost and individuals must have the necessary capacity to fulfil the roles. These positions and functions should be established soon (no later than AY 22/23), to ensure ongoing leadership in relation to REF activities.

No later than two years out from REF2028, as the pace of work picks up and we begin to develop draft documents, UoA leads should be appointed; these may be some of the same people previously involved in specific aspects of development as outlined above or be different staff.

It is important to note that LU's REF EIA identified, in real time, that the membership of some REF-related groups was insufficiently representative of diversity such as ethnicity, gender, contractual status (e.g., part-time) and career stage. Whilst these issues were addressed in REF2021, they should be emphasised at the outset of consideration of REF2028 and given heightened importance via appropriate EIA activity (Rec. 4). Effective management of EDI issues will require the availability and sensitive reporting of diversity data to School decision makers.

There was confusion in some Schools over whom had ultimate responsibility for making substantive decisions (e.g., where individuals would be returned, or which ICSs were submitted). Was it UoA leadership, School governance (Dean, ADs) and / or Central leadership (LUSTRE, PVC(R&I), APVC)? Decision-making responsibility for different aspects of REF activity should be clear in role descriptions.

22% of UoA team members did not think there was clarity in the division of responsibilities and the role of Deans in REF preparations was singled out as particularly confusing: *"[there was] a lack of clarity in decision making between the UoA lead/submission team and the Deans [which] delayed decision making"*. Early clarification of the role of Deans in REF2028 would be helpful – for example, should Deans act as the 'clients' who quality-check the developing UoA submissions, albeit that ADR&Is have responsibility for driving the process? Decisions about this may vary between Schools as a function of the size and number of UoAs, but it is important in all cases to establish School governance structures with clear responsibilities for internal activities and external liaison with the PVC(R&I), APVC REF and PS teams. Simple tools, like an infographic providing an overview of the governing structure, lines of communication and decision-making responsibilities would be helpful.

Related to this, where multiple Schools feed into a single UoA, the Schools should establish operational and strategic lines of communication now to consider UoA membership, output quality review and ICS development as well as the high-level decisions made by Schools (e.g., regarding staff recruitment). This should not be viewed as a threat to School

autonomy; there is mutual benefit in Schools working together at Dean level, to accommodate the needs of shared UoAs.

The need for clarity about whom has responsibility for what is reflected in the online survey results where 21% of survey respondents found School and University communications to be unclear or ineffective with comments suggesting this reflected a lack of clarity about whom had responsibility for some REF actions. 7% of survey respondents (n=89) found the amount of information and guidance they received from either the School or Centre to be “overwhelming”, 15% found it “insufficient” and the majority (79%) found it “sufficient”. This suggests that the amount of information received was generally appropriate.

#### 4. **Incorporate understanding from the REF2021 Equality Impact Assessment; prioritise EDI in research culture and in REF2028 preparations**

When colleagues in the focus groups were asked what Loughborough did well, numerous comments highlighted the positive, supportive and “*humane*” environment in which the REF return was prepared. There was a collegiate, team spirit amongst those responsible for the return that helped enormously to maximise the human resources available and optimise the process. This approach was maintained via positive personal interactions, thoughtful communication, and the right management ‘tone’. This extended to Loughborough’s strategic decision to again expect that everyone would be eligible and included.

*We should capitalise on this success and strive to maintain a collaborative, best-practice REF community characterised by kindness, open dialogue and peer-support.* For example, real-time feedback on systems and processes should be encouraged, discussed and acted upon with the exchange of best practice encouraged across all REF groups (e.g., UoA teams, ICS authors, PS staff etc.) using common workspaces, noticeboards and chat tools to facilitate informal communication.

In contrast we received very few negative comments about the way in which people had been treated and valued. For example, only one of nineteen respondents to questions about the Individual Circumstances process disagreed that it been reliable, effective and of high quality. One anonymous written comment, reiterated in a small number of private conversations, pointed to unkind treatment of PS and academic colleagues by senior academics, for example, by being unnecessarily combative and resistant when offered well-informed advice in good faith. *It is important to ensure that colleagues who identify problems are comfortable with reporting unreasonable behaviour, which can be investigated and dealt with by Deans or PSLT.*

Analysis of the online survey results revealed the following slight differences in responses between groups:

- Women were less likely than men to feel that our submission processes and practices yielded the best possible REF return.
- Women were less likely than men to think that timetables for the development and delivery of environment statements, ICSs and output scoring were appropriate.
- Women and BAME colleagues were less likely than men and white colleagues to consider communications from the University to be effective and clear. BAME colleagues were also less likely to think that School communications were effective and clear.

These findings evidence the importance of open dialogue, exchange of best practice, real-time feedback and appropriate representation in REF-related groups, as well as other EDI challenges identified by the REF EIA (see below). We should agree general principles around the timing of activities and the language and frequency of communications to support the whole academic community.

EDI information should be more readily available throughout the cycle to address concerns raised by the REF2021 EIA (below), support the writing of environment statements, meet the explicit EDI focus of the new University Strategy and ensure we are aware of any emerging bias or impact on specific groups. Equality Impact Assessments should be used to monitor REF activities (e.g., output quality review, ICS selection) as well as broader research activity and address any concerns that emerge on an ongoing basis. This will require appropriate training for staff in EIA methodologies, interpretation and responses. Disciplinary differences are evident in the REF EIA analysis (e.g., one UoA had exclusively male ICS authors and another exclusively female ICS authors), which indicates we need EIA information and activity at School level, so that problems can be identified where they exist and addressed efficiently.

The REF2021 EIA identified several significant issues that must be addressed at the outset of this REF cycle and fall across the remits of PVC(R&I) and PVC(EDI). An action plan has been developed and will be progressed shortly. These issues were:

- (a) *Outputs*. Although our REF selection of outputs did not raise any concerns (outputs were selected in proportion to the FTE in protected groups) there were differences between the average number of available outputs in the selection pools attributed to female versus male authors and co-authors, with disproportionately fewer available outputs authored by female staff across the institution. In addition, it was found that disabled staff authored fewer outputs. It is crucial that these issues are addressed to ensure we have the very best pool of material to select from. Regular evaluation of research output quality scores under recommendation 8 should be used to support annual EIA monitoring that seeks to identify and to address the following challenges:
- Barriers to publication for women, that might include the impact of maternity leave and associated return-to-work support, and workload differences linked to disproportionately high administrative or teaching responsibilities. This, of course, has broader recruitment, reward and promotion implications for women.
  - Barriers to publication for disabled staff. Again, there are broader implications of this for disabled colleagues that should be addressed. In addition, there is a need for greater activity focused on the under-reporting of disability by staff.
- (b) *Impact Case Studies*. BAME staff were under-represented in ICS authorship. ICSs should be viewed as a way to raise the profile of researchers from under-represented groups as well as their work. Such considerations are important when Schools and UoA submission teams undertake exercises to scope out potential and developing ICSs, ensuring equality of opportunity and examining representation across the whole team behind each ICS. For example, it was found that some ICS submissions had a disproportionate gender balance, with STEM ICSs led by men by a significant majority.

As for female colleagues in relation to output selection, we need to address the underpinning issues here and determine whether there are barriers to ICS development by BAME or female colleagues. In addition, when the time comes for ICS selection, as with output reviewing, EIA scrutiny is required to identify and address any bias.

**5. In Professional Service units, begin REF programme management now, with particular attention given to long-term planning of the PS resource required for REF delivery.**

This recommendation is based on a general view that resourcing of REF activities was lean in PS teams and characterised by nimble, short-term fixes rather than appropriate, long-term, coordination and planning for REF's service needs.

- Small numbers of PS colleagues carried significant burdens, often outside of previously agreed or understood roles; e.g., the PDR and RDM colleagues who shifted into ICS support roles where they provided an additional range of functions.
- The RQV team, who were already stretched by their support for REF activities, were put under additional pressure by the relatively late decision to ensure all 2020 outputs were OA, even if not returned to REF.
- M&A encountered a lot of unanticipated work in the final 12 months when asked to update websites to align with environment statements.

In the online survey, high proportions of respondents (41 to 64%) believed that key information systems including iTrent, LUPIN, the REF Modeller and REF submission system were high risk pinch points because only small numbers of staff were trained in their REF-relevant use. In relation to the workload available to run these systems, the percentage of respondents who thought appropriate workload allocation was available varied between 50% and 77%.

This resulted in late-in-the-day shifts of staff, with attendant hand-over and training costs that added significant pressure to small teams and had knock-on effects across PS delivery. Allied to this, there was an over-reliance on individuals rather than teams, which resulted in too many singular points of failure and poor resilience; a high-risk strategy that could have come unstuck. A good example of this was the REF Modeller, where all UoAs relied heavily on the “*amazing job*” done by a single individual, but whose availability was then a high-risk factor.

To avoid these problems, **centralised planning and programme management of the support required to deliver REF, should begin now, including identification of who has responsibility for this activity.**

A framework and timescale for development would be helpful, mapped onto REF milestones. For example, this planning should consider how adequate resilience and capacity can be ensured using a combination of new PS resource and resilience building in key teams, secondments and placements. Care should be taken with the timing and duration of temporary posts and staff movements in the final two-year period to ensure they do not simply add a training burden to key PS teams. Service units should establish the needs of the institution and of UoAs early in the cycle, translate these into required systems, tasks and personnel, and begin to plan their delivery.

When all staff groups were asked whether resources were sufficient in terms of available training, guidance and support one third of PS respondents thought these resources were inadequate. Training and development across the University community in the importance of REF, in its component parts, and in the technical systems used to service REF, will develop the widespread understanding and skills needed to facilitate support. We will need

to update our guidance as Research England develop their rules and expectations for 2028 should be part of this communication.

**6. Ensure adequate and consistent recognition of contributions to REF in the workload planning of Schools and service divisions, and in staff evaluations.**

This recommendation is based on a view that there was under-estimation and inconsistent recognition of REF activity (e.g., in allocation of workload and PDR conversations) in some Schools, with impacts on the existing commitments of key UoA team members and ICS authors. This extended to PS teams, where it was felt that explicit recognition of REF-specific activities is needed to ensure REF tasks can be given adequate time and attention. For example, when all staff groups (PVC/APVC, Deans, UoA leadership, ADEs, ICS authors, Output reviewers, Directors of Professional Services and PS staff) were asked whether the number and capacity of each Group's members were sufficient to fulfil REF roles, one third of PS respondents said the resource was inadequate. Survey quotes: *"I don't think there were enough people (like me) involved"*; *"I don't think there was sufficient resource in the central REF team"*; *"the workloads of many P/S colleagues involved were exceptionally intense (including colleagues who were working beyond full-time hours whilst being paid on their part-time contracts) and at times unmanageable."*

These difficulties sometimes manifested as an over-dependence on good will to get tasks done and a disparity in where burdens fell. In some Schools workload allocation for REF responsibilities was straightforward and consistent, but in others it was late coming. This view was most strongly expressed by ADEs, authors of ICSs, output review teams, RDMs and PDMs, UoA Leads, and the RQV team. Survey quote: *"the dedication of individuals was exceptional but LU should not have had to rely on this."*

There is a balance to be struck between ensuring that REF activities are adequately recognised and avoiding a situation where REF drives, rather than reflects, University research and impact strategy and operations. Many of the research and impact activities pursued by academic staff and supported by PS teams ultimately feed REF outcomes but are being pursued anyway as part of personal, School and University initiatives and priorities. **The University, Schools and service providers should recognise activities that are REF specific (e.g., UoA leadership, output scoring, ICS production, writing environments statements) in PDR, promotion and workload planning.**

Specific findings associated with ICS and Output systems are outlined below, but **a general point made in various focus groups was the need to accompany adequate recognition for REF-specific activities with widespread training and education about the importance of REF and the expected contributions of all academic and PS staff.** External expertise (former panel members and other, e.g., Mark Reid on Impact) should be used to sense check and develop internal understanding.

**7. Improve understanding of research impact and ICS, and initiate processes for identifying potential ICS alongside plans for monitoring progress, incentivising activity and supporting authors.**

This recommendation is based on a common impression that identification and development of viable ICS was generally challenging and slow, with a shortage of ready ICS close to the deadline in some Schools. 37% of online survey respondents (n=66) felt that we did not get the timing of ICS preparation correct. It was suggested that RIDE



meetings had been useful but not achieved very much concrete progress. In detail, 33% of survey respondents (n=40) disagreed or strongly disagreed that processes delivered timely, reliable, effective case study drafts and 31% felt the same about evidence gathering. When all staff groups were asked whether resources were sufficient in terms of available training, guidance and support, 7 of 17 ICS authors thought these resources were inadequate. Comments reflecting the challenges of ICS production, albeit with different perspectives, came from most focus groups including PVCs, Deans, ADRs and ADEs, PDMs and RDMs, and ICS authors. Notably, the support provided by APVC REF for ICS authors and the PS teams working on them was highlighted as essential and even “transformative”. Survey quote: “[APVC REF] was brilliant at supporting with feedback at the final stages of the ICS”; “ICS feedback from [APVC REF] was always very, very helpful”.

Underestimation of the time needed to properly evidence impact and to construct an ICS was common. More generally, we were told by respondents that impact is still poorly understood in general terms, with a lack of understanding of how ICS can be developed from the knowledge exchange/enterprise/innovation work that all RTE colleagues undertake. Partly in response to this, two successful Impact Roadshows have already been delivered to the community since the REF2021 submission, led by ICS authors, as forums to display the diversity of impact and pass on experience and expertise. The web presence of every Loughborough ICS as a “spotlight” is also an excellent resource.

Across the university, training around key aspects of impact in the broadest sense, and of ICS development in particular, should be prioritised. This training could include consideration of public engagement, research visibility, pathways to impact, types of impacts and benefits, engaging with beneficiaries to evidence impact, ongoing collection of impact evidence. Alongside this, thought should be given to how the particular skills of PDMs and RDMs (for example in partnership development and evidence gathering) can be best utilised to support ICS authors. For this to work effectively, these responsibilities should be part of PDM and RDM job descriptions and expectations, with appropriate apportionment of time. Such work is already underway and also highlights the role that other initiatives, such as the Policy Unit and the Industrial Policy Research Centre, can play.

Schools should begin a programme of work now, to support the development and delivery of sufficient ICS's based on appropriate training, support and progress monitoring. There is a need to pin down what is 'sufficient' in relation to anticipated numbers given forecast FTE plus a contingency. There was a feeling that it was unhelpful to have too many 'spare' ICS and that every effort should be made to make early decisions because colleagues did not want to invest time without some degree of certainty that the work would be worthwhile. Research areas with strong or recurring impact are very likely known to us already, so it should be feasible to identify the most likely ICS for 2028 now. Schools may nevertheless wish to audit impact activity to be confident of this and to identify pipeline activity that would benefit from support. Monitoring progress is crucial, and some flexibility and contingency are needed to manage staff churn, the emergence of strong impact evidence late in the day, or outcomes that fall short of expectations. Care should be taken to recognise that ICS develop at different rates, yet there was a tendency to make direct comparisons between ICS at certain points in time, which caused anxiety for staff.

The REF2021 EIA showed that BAME and female colleagues were under-represented in ICS authorship. This requires attention as discussed above under Recommendation 4.

It is unlikely that a one-size-fits-all strategy can deliver ICS efficiently. Rather, **individual ICS authorship teams will require different types of support, resources and training depending on their ICS experience and the nature of their project, such that bespoke plans for each potential ICS should be established and followed.** Generous workload allocation in some schools did not ensure straightforward ICS delivery, which suggests that workload is not the only requirement for success. Monitoring, mentoring, coaching, and an ICS authors forum should also be considered, along with access to EPG and School-based funding schemes. In addition, some ICS will benefit from long-term, dedicated PS support that is recognised in, for example, PDM work-planning and impact support.

The current reorganisation of research and enterprise governance at University and School level must not jeopardize ICS generation and support. Loughborough London may need additional support to train colleagues and develop ICS, given that they did not return ICS in REF2021 but will in REF2028.

The APVC REF produced an authoritative 10-point summary statement about the lessons learned from our experience of developing ICS for REF2021 and the core elements of retaining relevant knowledge and planning for RE2028. The document is supported with a series of helpful tools and documents. This material should be available to whomever takes responsibility for planning ICS actions following this review.

## **8. Improve understanding of research output quality, including via output scoring and feedback.**

We should guard against REF driving the activities of our researchers, but we must also ensure that colleagues understand the criteria and scoring used by REF, so that they understand the output quality expectations of REF2028. We believe that we can produce a rich pool of high-scoring REF outputs without taking a very narrow REF-focused view of research quality. **We recommend regular scoring of research outputs wrapped in a package of additional pre-publication assessment, training and support.**

(a) *Understanding and training.* We should recognise that not all outputs are destined for REF but also support colleagues to understand the expectations of REF (the number of high-quality REF outputs required), the qualities of a high-scoring REF output and what can be done to improve the likelihood of scoring high. For example:

- Schools should make use of discipline-specific recent panellists (both internal and external to LU) to understand REF2021 scoring in relevant UoAs. This understanding should be used to update or develop tools and training, for example, self-assessment tools, mock review exercises and calibration events.
- The pre-publication self-assessment tool that already exists should be updated and tailored to specific UoAs and disseminated with encouragement to use it.
- Pre-publication peer review is difficult to mandate and monitor but should be encouraged in schools to assist with quality development. Many colleagues already work in buddy groups, across research groups, or with mentors to peer-review work prior to submission. Schools should encourage and support pre-publication review and provide guidance around REF scoring to feed into that process.
- New RTE and SSAR staff who have not been through a REF cycle should be given particular attention, for example as part of the New Lecturers Programme, output quality should be emphasised over quantity. At present RVQ colleagues contribute to this training, and that should be continued.

- (b) *Scoring and feedback.* Although 82% of survey respondents (n=84) felt that the timing of output quality scoring was appropriate, there were also strong comments in the online feedback and in focus groups about the benefits to the University and to individuals of earlier, regular, ongoing evaluation of outputs against REF scoring criteria. Embedding output scoring and feedback as a standard element of our research culture will emphasise the importance of quality over quantity and developmental feedback will help to improve the quality of research outputs. Beginning this process soon will overcome a problem noted in several schools – that too much peer scoring of potential REF outputs was done too late, which generated an excessively large burden and pulled key staff away from other commitments late in the cycle. In addition, scoring will provide academic staff with output quality scores that they can use elsewhere; for example, in promotion applications as one element of a broader basket of research quality indicators.

While approximately 57% of survey respondents (n=59) agreed or strongly agreed that output scoring and selection was reliable, effective and of high quality, approximately 28% were neutral and 16% disagreed. It is unclear what proportion of the respondents were academics, but this result suggests that for some academic colleagues, at least, the scoring of their work was not viewed positively. Comments indicate that some colleagues viewed REF scoring as a performance monitoring tool and others found the process in their school to be devoid of feedback and explanation, where opacity undermined faith in the process. It is therefore crucial to ensure that REF scoring criteria and processes are understood and managed sensitively to provide developmental and other benefits.

It is important here to allow School's flexibility in their approach because of disciplinary differences in output types and publication strategies, but guiding principles are:

- The output review process must not be overly focused on REF and should be handled sensitively so it is very clear that it is not being used as a singular or definitive means of assessing research performance. Related to this, it is important that there is recognition that REF should contribute to personal publication plans and strategy but not drive them. Scores from this process should only be regarded as one element of a broader basket of research quality indicators. Outputs that might be of sufficient quality to support a promotion case but that would not be submittable to REF (e.g., systematic reviews, hyper-authored papers) should still be encouraged.
- The process should be developmental with narrative (and, where appropriate, face-to-face) feedback on the visibility and clarity of the work's originality, significance and rigour.
- Inclusion by the author of draft supporting statements (e.g., double weighted, author contribution etc.) *might* also be helpful. In the online survey, only 38% of respondents agreed that the processes used for producing supporting statements were efficient and of high quality, suggesting a need to promote and develop supporting statements earlier in the cycle. A difficulty here is the possibility that REF rules will change to remove or augment the requirements around supporting statements of different kinds. Intelligence from the RQV team will be helpful in guiding Schools on this matter.
- Score approximately one output per year for Independent Research staff. The stipulation of "approximately one" is guidance that recognises a longer gestation for

some output types (e.g., monographs), although progress against monographs should still be evaluated via annual review of chapters.

- Scoring could begin immediately and should begin no later than AY 22-23, whilst recognising some concerns: that an annual process may emphasise quantity over quality and that assessment in AY 21-22 may have negative impacts on morale as we emerge from the Pandemic. Refinement and checking of scores should take place in the final REF phase (final 2 years/18 months).
- Peer scoring should be carried out by a small group of academics in each UoA (~20% of FTE) guided by the REF2021 Code of Practice. EDI considerations are paramount and good practice should be ensured by ADR&I oversight. A small group is necessary to maintain consistency, but developmental opportunities should be built into the rolling membership of this group.
- Peer scoring groups should be trained and use moderation and calibration to ensure the consistency, accuracy and credibility of scoring. This important work should be overseen by ADR&Is. In addition to double-scoring and periodic calibration exercises, it should include best practice arising from the REF2021 CoP and EIA, e.g., blind reviewing and the use of bibliometric analysis to check for unconscious bias by protected characteristics.
- The RQV Team will support Schools in carrying out output reviews and scoring. The specifics will be established in discussion with individual Schools but could include a variety of services including online access to outputs, management of review scores, running reports for Schools or QICR, and flagging likely REF returns.
- Some reviewers for REF2021 felt under-trained and exposed, so strong training with appropriate validation is essential. To help calibrate the reading group, individual feedback should go to each reviewer on how they scored in relation to the rest of the group. Input from internal and external REF panel members should be sought to maximise understanding and accuracy, and to legitimise the process.

#### **9. Appropriate digital systems need to be in place soon to support Professional Service's REF functions and UoA teams in their management of outputs, ICS and environment statements**

The percentage of respondents who agreed or strongly agreed that information processes and systems were reliable and efficient dropped below 45% for output metadata and citation checks; non-DOI output gathering; ICS metadata collation; REF uploading of ICSs; checking and verification of PGR and grant income data; establishing in-kind income; and justifying 0.2 to 0.29 appointments. These responses highlight a general level of concern about the ability to easily generate the data reports that either PS or academic users wanted.

In UoA teams the REF modeller was widely valued, although UoAs with large numbers of outputs found it less effective; the impact tracking system from Vertigo Ventures was roundly disliked and unfit for purpose; and there was a general consensus that too much time was spent chasing and culling data and evidence for 5b environment statements from disparate university and individual sources - only 46% of survey respondents agreed or strongly agreed that data gathering for 5bs was reliable, effective and high quality.

Appropriate digital information systems are needed now by Central University services to support annual reporting and data tracking work that feeds research and impact management, including for REF. UoA teams need common, user-friendly, straightforward

digital systems for ongoing capture of information and evidence. Our information systems should reduce the net burden on staff, not add to it, and we should avoid duplication. Central systems are preferable to enable standardised reporting and ensure access and continuity in case individual staff leave. Despite effective centralised data collection, digital systems were not always available to automate processes which led to excessive and resource-heavy manual checking. PS teams therefore need greater support from ITS to develop more automated systems that preclude the need for excessive manual data checks and maximise efficient data sharing between systems. It is important to not reinvent the wheel and chase new systems if existing systems can provide what is needed.

In terms of REF systems for delivery and their potential future development:

- (a) **Environment statements (REF5).** The full range of information that is useful to Units for REF5 needs careful definition based on consultation with 5b authors. Some standard data may best be gathered regularly and delivered by Tableau (suggested by one ADR as a 'basket of metrics') including EDI information and large income awards). In addition, esteem information could be held and delivered via Professional activities (LUPIN core). Currently, data is entered by individuals on an ad-hoc basis with fields needing review/refining to capture the range of activities useful for REF5. Data could be centrally managed (checked and reviewed), and reports provided on request or regularly to Schools, UoA teams or QICR. If the PDR system could pull through esteem information from LUPIN, this would reduce duplicate effort and maximise staff engagement. If information could also be pulled through to the relevant tab on staff web pages that might also increase engagement.
- (b) **Research Degree, RG&C income & RC income-in-kind data (REF4)** HESA data was split by individual and aligned to their UoA, with extraction to Tableau for summary by UoA. The process of mapping RG&C income and degrees awarded by the Planning and RQV teams worked well, with ensuing discussions ironing out issues raised by Schools. We think that the low proportion of staff who agreed that this process worked well, reflects concerns in UoAs about the late availability of this information and the difficulties of fixing small omissions and errors after staff had left and collective memory had been lost. If staff UoA alignments were maintained as an ongoing concern, this information could be generated annually because the HESA data is provided annually. This would be of value to QICR, to Schools and it would allow any errors to be identified immediately and therefore fixed more easily.
- (c) **Impact Case Studies (REF3).** VVIT did not provide the anticipated solution for ICS development, which reflects other HEIs experiences, and hence the licence has not been continued for 2022/23. Subsequent national discussions confirm there is currently no single system that can usefully capture all elements of impact development through to a finished REF ICS. Focus is therefore recommended on a bespoke solution. Simple capture of core information, for reporting purposes about potential REF ICS's, may be a sensible solution, requiring minimal input and set-up. This could be managed centrally whilst enabling consistent reporting for multiple purposes (QICR, Schools, UoA teams). The lowest cost and most easily integrated solution would be via the LUPIN Impact Module. Essential ICS field information could link with existing (LUPIN core) information (people, outputs and grants) to provide simple reports. Use of a One-drive Impact workspace, which ultimately was used for gathering the final stages of REF2021 ICS's, could latterly provide evidence and ICS text document storage with access flexibility.

- (d) **Outputs & Open Access information (REF2)** (including output metadata, OA flags, staff and UoA links, and additional output information). The REF Submission System was populated using the LUPIN Assessment Module (AM), which is included in our existing subscription and embedded in three year rolling fixed costs to Dec 2023. It draws data from iTrent (staff) and the Research Repository (OA) and uses imported REF Modeller output selections and other data such as commentary & flags. Only the REF Modeller was used by Units with all other linked systems used by RQV/Planning/Library/HR staff only.

REF2 Issues of concern arising from the survey respondents are known to be due to the move to a new Research Repository late in the REF cycle, which created a significant manual task in Library/RQV OA checks and reporting.

**LUPIN (core)** is used regularly by all R&T staff to store output metadata and deposit research outputs in the Research Repository. It is used to populate staff web pages, PDR forms and is a data source for REF and OA processes. LUPIN has reached a point (Version 6) where cloud hosting or LU server updates are required to enable any further updates requiring early (Spring 2022) Operations Committee funding resource consideration to enable current and future developmental functionality.

**LUPIN Assessment Module (AM)** (not visible to LUPIN users) could provide on-going UoA membership tracking and support local annual output review processes in Schools or UoAs from 2022 onwards. Outputs to be reviewed can be flagged, linked to people and UoAs and scores can be held securely, enabling reporting for UoAs, QICR and for future REF planning. This would reduce the need for local score storage and duplication. It could be further developed to enable output reviewers to access outputs via AM so that they could review and score in one place and even provide feedback via LUPIN.

**LUPIN OA Monitor** (current subscribed module not visible to users) enables OA monthly reporting, drawing also on the Research Repository. Work is on-going between relevant PS teams (RQV, Planning, Library, IT) to provide enhanced OA reporting and the developments required for the REF2028 OA Policy (addition of monographs).

**Output selections** were made by Units via a bespoke LU REF Modeller, with largely very good feedback. Comparison and selection of outputs from a pool is not likely to be required in the next few years and therefore whether an equivalent is needed and when, may be a decision for after the Research England REF Review (Review to be concluded end of 2022).

- (e) **Staff data (REF1&2&6)** REF specific fields are held on iTrent (UoA, ECR, Independent researcher) and were exported to the LUPIN AM, for linking with outputs (REF2) and exported directly for REF1 & 6. It is recommended that REF data is maintained as staff arrive or leave, change status & role, to capture the on-going shape and size of UoAs. ORCID individual information is held in parallel in iTrent and LUPIN and needs linking together, with a potential mandatory REF extraction requirement for REF2028. Work on this has commenced (RQV, IT, HR and Library) and requires dedicated time with resource.
- (f) **LUPIN Reporting Module (LUPIN core)** is not visible to users but enables all current bespoke reports to be run. This can only be used by IT at present, with work required to provide a platform for use by RQV and the Library; this has been on request but has not

been enabled due to time and resource. It is recognised as essential to LUPIN, REF and annual management developments looking forward.

## 10. Suggestions for the latter stages of the submission: UoA feedback, prioritisation of REF, meetings and document timing

### (a) Feedback

Survey data and qualitative responses indicate a consensus that LUSTRE and the feedback received on environment statements, ICS, and output supporting statements was overwhelmingly beneficial (*“brilliant”*). Feedback was praised for being detailed, constructive and essential to the production of strong returns (*“game-changing”*). This level and quality of feedback required the concerted and sustained effort of LUSTRE members but particularly the PVC and APVC REF, especially during the 12 months up to submission. This highlights the value of the APVC REF (or equivalent; Rec. 1) role in supporting the PVC(R&I).

While senior support for ICSs and 5bs was singled out for praise by many online respondents and in the focus groups, 23% and 18% of online survey respondents were critical of the ICS and 5b review process. Comments indicate that this hinged on (i) the difficulty of managing feedback from several people over an extended period, especially where there were inconsistencies in recommendations, (ii) a view in one or two schools that feedback came from LUSTRE panel members without subject-level expertise; and (iii) that feedback was almost too honest in some cases so that it had to be filtered to avoid demoralising team members. Elsewhere contrasting recommendations were viewed as an inevitable consequence of imperfect REF knowledge, central expertise was welcomed and interpreted locally without great concern and misunderstandings were accommodated via dialogue with LUSTRE members.

While multiple feedback opinions have the benefit of capturing a diversity of views, consistent advice from fewer sources would avoid this problem. A single person who is well informed by others can act as a single point of contact, driving consistent messages around a particular REF element (ICS, 5bs, supporting statements). We received some comments indicating that the process for giving advice improved over time, became consistent with external advice, and that this was important in terms of helping staff feel better prepared. *We should make the job of those giving and receiving feedback less challenging by ensuring that authoritative feedback is provided by fewer people driving consistent messages, with adequate space and time for genuine conversation and resolution of disagreements.*

### (b) Recognition of REF as a Priority

The significant effort required in the last few months to bring some ICSs, 5bs and output supporting statements to a high standard and in line with REF requirements, suggests that our preparations were not ideal in all parts of the University. 24% of survey respondents (n=74) felt that we did not get the timing of 5b development right and the equivalent for ICSs was 37% (n=66). Despite the efforts of LUSTRE, UoA teams fell short of delivering drafts of sufficient quality (even completeness) by agreed points in time and in some cases, there was only marginal development of drafts between LUSTRE meetings.

In some instances, authors were unable, or unwilling, to prioritise 5b writing, ICS development and other REF tasks between LUSTRE meetings. Going forward, we should ensure that REF activities like these are fully recognised in workload allocations (Rec. 6), give careful thought to whether, for example HoDs or ADRs with many other responsibilities, should be 5b authors (Rec. 3), and ensure better training and education about ICS development (Rec. 7) and construction of supporting statements.

(c) **Centre and Schools**

While most Schools felt they benefitted greatly from central advice and guidance, some Schools felt that local, subject-specific understanding and expertise was undervalued. They expressed a desire for greater flexibility and voice in the design and execution of REF monitoring and evaluation systems. Schools, via ADR&I, should, as in REF2021, be involved in the design of REF progress management systems. These aspects are reflected in Recommendations 3, 4 and 5. Flexibility between Schools should be explored, as highlighted at several points in the recommendations above. However, we recommend that local contributions are always based on the expert opinion of subject-specific panellists, who have the experience to provide authoritative advice, and accommodated alongside generic advice from the Centre gleaned from across all panels.

LUSTRE's purpose was widely understood and valued with 20 of 20 LUSTRE attendees agreeing (in the online survey) that its purpose and remit was clear and that it made a valuable contribution to REF preparations. It was particularly useful for highlighting areas that were a concern, setting deadlines, providing helpful feedback and keeping track on progress. LUSTRE or an equivalent should be retained to provide detailed and frequent support for UoAs in the final two years of the cycle (85% of survey respondents (n=46) said that the initiation and timing of LUSTRE meetings was appropriate). However, comments were also made that this committee should be smaller than in REF2021 to allow more time for discussion and exchange, perhaps with more targeted meetings, relevant to each element of the submission document: "*only a small subset of those involved actually contributed to the conversation... [but later] direct advice from PVCR and A-PVCR was very valuable*".

(d) **Development of final documents**

We should evaluate progress on environment statements, ICS, and output supporting statements (via QICR) in the first half of the REF cycle, ensuring that the work needed to write these documents is underway and being managed in Schools. Reviews should be robust and challenging to address progress against UoA promises; REF-related training activities; emergent UoA plans; 5b evidence gathering; ICS support and development; progress on output scoring; and construction of supporting statements. By 2024-25 QICR might expect to see and comment on planning drafts of environment statements and ICS that emphasise structure and content (e.g., bullet points under key headings). Detailed work on narrative and presentation should be given more emphasis later in the cycle, from approximately two years out.

## **Summary**

The review has shown that the University has a lot to be proud of in terms of how the REF2021 submission was developed, managed and delivered, particularly in relation to the REF2014 process. Unsurprisingly, there are several areas where targeted activity and longer-term pre-emptive action would enhance both the quality of the underpinning material and of the final



submission. These recommendations will also have positive effects on EDI strategy, the efficiency and effectiveness of resource use, staff understanding and expertise in research and impact activities generally, and in recognising the importance of REF for supporting both University and individual Research and Innovation strategic aims.