

REF 2021 Code of Practice: Equality Impact Assessment

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Introduction

The purpose of this document is to assess the differential impact of ‘protected characteristics’ on staff members’ ability to participate in the REF and whether the University’s REF 2021 Code of Practice (COP) created barriers to participation. Edge Hill University’s Research Office is responsible for producing this equality impact assessment and Edge Hill University’s Research and Innovation Committee is responsible for its approval and implementation of actions arising. In the implementation of any actions, the Research Office (RO) will work closely with Human Resources (HR).

Background/Context

The Research Excellence Framework (REF), undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies, is the current system for assessing research quality in the United Kingdom. The REF is governed by the following principles:

- **Equity** - the fair and equal assessment of all types of research and forms of research output.
 - **Equality** - promoting equality and diversity in all aspects of the assessment.
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- **Transparency** - the clear and open process through which decisions are made and information about the assessment process is shared.

All institutions participating in REF 2021 were required to produce a Code of Practice, COP, underpinned by four key principles, transparency, consistency, accountability, and inclusivity, to document their processes for:

- Determining who is an independent researcher for REF purposes
- The fair and transparent identification of staff with significant responsibility for research
- The selection of outputs to be submitted
- The disclosure of personal circumstances
- How the code relates to broader institutional policies/strategies that promote and support equality and diversity.

Edge Hill University used several measures to embed equality, diversity and inclusion which we documented in our COP. Measures included:

- Diverse membership of working group that designed our COP
- Providing opportunities to influence design of COP (appendix 1 of COP)
- Ensuring communications reached all staff (appendix 3 of COP)
- Seeking authority from staff (Teaching Staff Consultative and Negotiation Committee) for COP
- Establishing REF processes that would be implemented centrally to ensure consistency in the application of REF processes for all Unit of Assessment (UOA).
- Conducted equality impact assessments (appendix 14 of COP)
- Equality, diversity and inclusion training for all staff involved in REF process and decisions (appendix 3 of COP).

Scope

The following characteristics have been considered in our equality impact assessments:

- Sex/gender
- Race/ethnicity
- Age
- Disability
- Employment status (part-time/full-time)
- Seniority

We are not able to provide data analysis on other characteristics, such as sexual orientation, marital status, gender reassignment and religion/belief, since we do not collect the necessary data.

Edge Hill University's REF processes affect staff who have an academic research-only and/or teaching and research employment contract.

As documented in our REF 2021 Code of Practice, our schedule for equality impact assessments was as follows:

- Before mock REF 2017, completed spring 2018, based on outputs and staff identified (REF 2021 Code of Practice appendix 14)
- Before submission to Research England (REF 2021 Code of Practice appendix 14)
- After being reviewed by the Teaching Staff Consultative & Negotiation Committee/our branch University and College Union (if there are any changes)
- When identifying staff
- When selecting outputs for submission
- When considering appeals
- When preparing final submission.

Analyses

Edge Hill University took a collegial approach to the design of our REF 2021 Code of Practice. We recognise the need to be inclusive and we started from the principle that all academic staff (who have teaching and/or research contract) have the potential to be identified as independent researchers with significant responsibility for research. As discussed in our COP, the University generally employs academic staff on teaching and research contracts though we do not expect all staff on this contract type to have significant responsibility for research (SRR). Staff on teaching and research contracts are expected to teach to the highest standards; the remainder of their contract may be taken up with research, enterprise and knowledge exchange, professional practice and student placement, or student experience and employability.

Our mock REF exercise, held in 2017, identified that we would need to design processes for identifying 'Category A submitted' staff (appendix 1). The data showed that the majority of UOAs contained staff without SRR. Edge Hill University's REF Code of Practice Working Group designed our REF process in consultation with staff (appendix 1 of COP). The REF Code of Practice Working Group also completed a policy equality impact assessment (appendix 14 of COP) to ensure that our processes did not create barriers that would prevent those with protective characteristics participating. The COP was designed to be inclusive for all staff, and our aim was to increase the numbers of staff being returned as identified in our research strategy (aim to submit 50% of staff). A mark of our successful design is that as an institution we only received two appeals.

Our analyses at each stage of implementing our REF process concluded that REF processes did not have a disproportionate effect on any group with protected characteristics (see appendices for analyses). Where there were notable differences in representation, e.g., at an institutional level, men are more likely to be identified as having significant responsibility for research (SRR), this was largely a result of disciplinary norms (e.g., the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Medicine (UOA A3) and Faculty of Education (UOA C23), who employ 67% of our female staff and 33% of our male staff, have much lower

proportions of staff with SRR due to their business needs, which require staff from professional backgrounds. The data indicates that our staff with protected characteristics are generally more likely to be identified as having SRR.

In terms of analysing staff with protected characteristics and their identification as having SRR, we note that we are not the most diverse campus, so numbers of staff with protected characteristics were often low making nuanced analyses difficult. In addition, our UOAs are smaller than many universities which also means that disaggregating data was not always possible.

As a university at a particular stage of research development, we have a very low number of research-only colleagues. We gave clear criteria for determining research independence following Research England guidance and only three individuals met those criteria, which represented 20% of staff on research-only contracts. Given the very small numbers, it was not possible to produce statistically significant analyses based on protected characteristics.

When reviewing the selection of outputs, we generally found that the number of outputs corresponded with representation of staff in our submission. It was notable that ECRs and younger colleagues' outputs are well represented; this reflects two things: a) the fact that our recruitment processes have changed in the last ten years with a greater focus on research potential as a criterion for appointment in most areas (less the case in vocational subjects) and b) the conscious decision to include ECR outputs when all other selecting criteria were met to the same standard (i.e. we believed that the quality of two articles to be the same/very similar).

Our processes did not have a disproportionate impact on staff groups with protected characteristics since our whole REF process was managed with an approach that was inclusive of all staff regardless of their status or characteristics. Edge Hill University did not use any research quality measures to identify staff with SRR, instead will utilise our performance and development reviews (PDRs) processes. PDRs take a holistic approach to agreeing roles, objectives, responsibilities, development opportunities and support for individuals including reasonable adjustments. We are mindful, however, that many are appointed for their expertise in other areas and so one of our tasks is to support them into research careers where appropriate. This is reflected in the number of staff not identified as having SRR as they were completing doctorates or otherwise transitioning to being independent researchers. Our commitment to inclusivity is illustrated by the fact that staff who were identified as transitioning to independence in October 2019 were not assessed until the September 2020 meeting to determine whether they met the criteria for independence on 31 July 2020, maximising their chance to meet the REF definition of independent. Our inclusive approach is also reflected in the fact that we have increased the number of people in the REF by 77%, although all academic staff have the same standard contract.

Conclusions

The design and implementation of our REF Code of Practice did not have a detrimental impact for those with protected characteristics. Our approach focused on including as many staff as possible in our submission. The University strove to communicate effectively with staff to ensure that they understood the reasons for not being identified as having SRR if that were the case: the success of this is best measured by the fact that there were only two appeals.

Despite this positive outcome, there are a number of issues which need to be considered as we prepare for the next REF:

- Academic discipline is the key indicator for determining the likelihood of being identified as having SRR. We will continue supporting departments, particularly those with fewer staff identified as having SRR, with their research capacity building activities.
- Part-time staff are less likely to be identified as having SRR. As an institution we will investigate the motivation for having a part-time contract and examine why they are less likely to have SRR.
- Black, Asian and minority ethnic staff, overall, are well represented in our submission but Edge Hill's staffing profile could benefit from increased diversity.
- Disabled staff, overall, are well represented in our submission but their numbers are small. The small number of staff with declared disabilities may indicate that staff are not comfortable with disclosing their disability or that their disability does not affect their role, so they choose not to disclose. We need to identify the reason behind non-disclosure and ensure that processes allow people to feel confident in making a disclosure, which would, of course, remain voluntary.
- We have identified a number of staff who are undertaking doctoral studies or who are transitioning to independent researchers. Edge Hill University will need to ensure we have appropriate support in place to facilitate our staff in developing a research career which should result in more staff being returned to the next REF

Edge Hill University aims to significantly increase the number of staff submitted to the next REF. Research capacity building will continue to be prioritised by:

- Maintaining our emphasis on recruiting staff who are committed to developing their research careers
- Providing development opportunities to support staff in developing their research career

As we continue to grow our research capacity, we will need to be mindful that Edge Hill University has a mixed staffing profile and we do not expect all academic staff to have significant responsibility for research. Our UOAs will require tailored support because they are at different stages of their research capacity building journey and have different expectations for their staff. UOAs have already started to draft action plans to deliver their strategic objectives as identified in their REF 5b.

Action plan

Edge Hill University aims to provide a safe, supportive and welcoming environment for its staff, students and visitors, where equality is promoted, diversity is valued and the rights and dignity of all is respected. The University regularly reviews its policies, practices, and conducts equality impact assessments to identify any potential barriers for those with protective characteristics. Equality, diversity, and inclusion training is mandatory at Edge Hill University. The University engages with several initiatives to advance equality such as:

- Disability Confident employer scheme

- Stonewall Champion
- Advance HE's Athena Swan charter
- Advance HE's Aurora Programme
- HR Excellence in Research Award

Key actions identified by the University for advancing equality:

- Recruitment

Edge Hill University has been reviewing the language we use in our job descriptions, adverts and the locations we advertise with the aim of attracting a wider range of candidates. We have also introduced a blind application process to try and prevent unconscious bias when shortlisting candidates for interview. These recruitment initiatives will be reviewed to establish whether they are attracting a wider range of candidates, particularly those from different ethnic communities and whether our shortlists reflect our candidates.

- Staff development – particularly for growing numbers of PDRAs

Staff development has always been a key component of our performance and development review (PDR) process. As signatories of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers we intend to introduce the expectation that academic staff should engage in a minimum of 10 days, pro rata, professional development. This will be particularly relevant to our postdoctoral research assistants, who are appointed to fixed-term posts on principal investigators' projects, to ensure they have time and development opportunities that will maximise their chances of secure permanent posts where they are working on their own projects.

- Ensuring that annual performance and development reviews (PDR) are a supportive process for staff to be recognised, to discuss their career aspirations, agree objectives, expectations and workload allocations. PDRs are a key process for identifying the needs of individual staff and providing adjustments and/or development opportunities, including support for practice staff who wish to transition to a research career. The University will continue to have workload allocation letters from managers that will be used to facilitate equality impact assessments and support the development of initiatives to grow our research capacity.
- Actively encourage role modelling of success for groups who are under-represented in the University (e.g., through visiting professors and external mentors)
- To investigate why part-time staff are less likely to be identified as having SRR.
- Implementing Athena Swan and HR Excellent in Research action plans over the REF period.
 - Increasing the number of departmental Athena Swan awards.
 - Monitor growth of the professoriate and readers (research leadership) through recruitment and promotions to identify trends based on protected characteristics.
 - Ensuring managers of researchers have effective training in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion, and mental health and wellbeing.
- To engage with Advance HE's Race Charter

Appendices have been redacted to prevent the identification of individuals.