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# HE Update

## Response to Final Guidance on REF2021

### January 2019

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## Background

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Earlier this week, the most recent guidance on REF2021 was published, including guidance on submissions, panel criteria, and a template for codes of practice. This offers significant clarity and detail about the next REF and in doing so has caused waves amongst the academic community principally because providers may submit returns for staff that have been made redundant.

### 1. Highlighting the Overarching Benefits

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It's important to first acknowledge that the recent guidance articulates the intended approach in incredibly clear detail. Much needed clarity has been given to areas such as the open access policy in relation to smaller providers. By including a threshold of 5% or one publication that need not be open access, the amendments cater for the smaller institutions whose 5% will round to 0. Consultation has also been helpful in amending the recognition of impacts, particularly in the case of certain impacts being recognised by all panels, instead of being panel specific.

### 2. The Biggest Concern

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The amendment that allows universities submit research outputs from former staff members, including those made redundant has caused significant comment. This is a preparatory amendment for the transition to REF2028, which will aim to ensure total non-portability of outputs from the funding institution. In some ways this is an attempt to deal with and regulate the transfer market and 'poaching' practices within the research community. However, it presents a potential threat for many, including Early Career Researchers, who see the portability of their outputs as a form of job security, which may be lost if not admissible to future REF exercises.

### 3. Why is This a Concern?

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Many of the concerns voiced within the academic community are wholly understandable. There are worries about a perceived threat to job security; threats to the development of early career researchers; and the potential for exploitative work practices. Much of this thinking is grounded in the belief that research is the intellectual property of the academic that affords them bargaining power in brokering relationships with their employer. The new approach also seems at odds with the REF5 requirement that institutions demonstrate how their environments support research. There is also some scepticism within the academic community that this amendment may create an incentive for institutions to discard research staff once REF results have been secured.



## 4. In Defence of this Change

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The other side of the argument however, posits that the new approach addresses 'poaching' of academic researchers as a wider sector malaise that has allowed institutions to skew REF outcomes by importing new academic staff close to submission deadlines, and to claim their previous research as the institution's own. It also seems equitable that institutions that have funded, or underwritten, research should benefit from the outputs.

## 5. Conclusion and Solutions

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Both sides of the argument are valid. The main problem seems to be that the amendment works for universities with an established research track record. Universities seeking to build their research profile, and individual researchers, whether established or at an early-career stage may feel disadvantaged by this amendment. Institutions need to respond appropriately: to build the confidence of all their research staff and to demonstrate their long-term commitment to research. As always, the environment is subject to further change for future REF years.



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