

Introduction

One of the ways that REF2021 supported equality and diversity was requiring institutions to recognise the effect that equality-related circumstances can have on an individual researcher's productivity. To achieve this the Funding Bodies required all institutions to document how they would adjust expectations that they have about the contribution individual researchers with relevant circumstances make to the potential pool of outputs. A further measure within the guidance to support equality and diversity was the ability to recognise the potential impact on the available output pool for units where there are high proportions of staff with circumstances. As such institutions were able to submit requests for the number of outputs to be reduced for a specific unit, where the size of the output pool has been disproportionately affected.

Bournemouth University (BU) documented our approach to staff circumstances, fully aligned to the REF Guidance¹, within the BU Code of Practice (CoP)². Throughout the exercise, the staff circumstances process has been adhered to and the process has not been subject to any internal appeals.

The role of the Board was to consider information disclosed by staff members as part of the staff circumstances data collection exercise; determine whether the disclosed circumstances met the criteria set out in the REF Guidance on Submissions (Part 3, Section 1: 'Staff circumstances'); verify the evidence provided; calculate the appropriate potential reduction in outputs for individuals and the units as a whole; contribute to BU's culture of equality and diversity, particularly in terms of promoting recognition of the effect that equality-related circumstances can have on an individual's ability to research productively; and consider any requests received from former staff regarding the attribution of outputs to them in the final submission.

The Board members attended mandatory REF-specific equality and diversity development sessions, as set out in the BU REF 2021 Code of Practice. In addition the Board were required to read the following documents to ensure a comprehensive understanding of equality and diversity with regard to the REF: BU REF 2021 Code of Practice; REF Guidance on Submissions; Panel Criteria and Working Methods; REF Guidance on Codes of Practice; REF 2014 EDAP final report. The Board members were recruited through an open call and were selected based on their prior knowledge and expertise in individual staff circumstances and equality and diversity issues.

The Board ran the Individual Staff Circumstances process centrally for 'Category A eligible' staff to voluntarily declare any individual circumstances that they believed had constrained their ability to work productively throughout the REF period. In Autumn 2019 and Summer 2020, all 'Category A eligible' staff were sent an email from the Chair of the Circumstances Board (Senior Member of HR) inviting them to complete a disclosure form.

¹ <https://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/guidance-on-submissions-201901/>

²

<https://www.bournemouth.ac.uk/sites/default/files/asset/document/BU%20REF%202021%20code%20of%20practice%20V2%20FINAL.pdf>

The Board considered the equality-related circumstances comprising qualifying as an ECR, absence from work due to secondments or career breaks outside the higher education sector, qualifying periods of family-related leave, circumstances with an equivalent effect to absence, that required a judgement about the appropriate reduction in outputs, which are related to disability, ill health, injury, mental health conditions, pregnancy, maternity, paternity, adoption or childcare other caring responsibilities (such as caring for an elderly or disabled family member), gender reassignment or other circumstances relating to protected characteristics or relating to activities protected by employment legislation.

In considering declared circumstances, the REF Circumstances Board considered whether the circumstances qualified and if so, recommended to the BU REF Steering Group that the appropriate potential output reduction in accordance with tariffs detailed in Annex L of the REF Guidance on Submissions be applied. The REF Steering Group considered the recommendations and made final decisions regarding submission and application of reductions.

Total number of staff declaring circumstances

Table 1 below records the following:

- The total number of staff at BU who voluntarily declared circumstances (whether or not these were submitted in a reduction request). Each staff member has only been counted once in this row regardless of the number of circumstances they have.
- The total number of circumstances declared (whether these were submitted in a reduction request). This is higher than the number of staff declaring circumstances as some staff declared multiple circumstances.
- The total number of declarations received that requested the removal of the minimum of one output.

Table 1: total declarations

	Total number across institution
Number of staff declaring circumstances	90
Number of circumstances declared	98
Number of minimum of one declarations	19

Section 2: Declarations by circumstance type

Table 2a below records the following:

- The number of staff who declared defined circumstances at BU. Some staff declared multiple circumstances, for example, if a staff member declared that they are an ECR and that they had a period of maternity leave. In this instance, the staff member is only counted once.
- The number of staff declaring circumstances requiring a judgement.

Table 2a: declarations by overall circumstance type

Circumstance type	Number of staff declaring circumstance
Defined circumstances	60
Circumstances requiring a judgement	30

Table 2b provides a breakdown of:

- The number of each defined circumstance type declared by staff at BU. e.g. if a staff member declared that they are an ECR and that they had a period of maternity leave, one instance is recorded for each circumstance in the relevant row.

Table 2b: declarations by type of defined circumstance

Circumstance type	Number declared
Early career researchers	46
Secondments or career breaks	0
Family-related leave	13
Former Staff Member	1

Reflections

BU sought to create a safe and supportive structure to enable staff to declare voluntarily any relevant circumstances, putting in place processes to adjust expectations of an individual's contribution to the unit's output pool (where the individual is entitled to a reduction), and ensuring staff are treated fairly.

In order to adjust expectations BU's REF CoP explained fully how individuals were able to voluntarily declare their individual circumstances so that BU could take this into account in preparing for our submission. We contacted every REF eligible member of staff to give them two opportunities to make a voluntary disclosure. This was in conjunction with organisational wide communications. Any absent member of staff (such as those on long-term sickness absence, parental leave, secondment or career break) were sent a hardcopy of the BU REF Code of Practice and the form in the post to their registered home address. Throughout the exercise communications reiterated that disclosure was entirely voluntary, and that staff were not required to complete the form should they not wish to do so. The Chair of the Board administered all enquires and provided individual advice to ensure that staff members understood the process and were making an informed decision as to whether to disclose. All staff members who disclosed circumstances received comprehensive communication regarding the recommendation of the Board and right of appeal.

Where individuals had circumstances approved by the Board that made them eligible for the removal of the requirement of a minimum of one output then a reduction of outputs was sought from UKRI. Other decisions regarding possible output reductions due to accepted circumstances were reviewed by the REF Steering Group to establish whether a unit had been disproportionately affected by accepted circumstances and if this warranted a request for a reduction to the number of outputs required for submission. Consideration was given to the proportion of staff in the unit with accepted circumstances, the role of the individual(s) with accepted circumstances within the submitting unit and the impact of their circumstances on colleagues and the potential output pool.

BU noted the following in respect of circumstances declared.

Whilst women accounted for 49% of the Category A staff, BU found that women were more likely to declare circumstances, accounting for 82% of the total disclosures (88% of the defined and 70% of the judgement disclosures) and 87% of the submitted circumstances. A proportion of the defined disclosures for women related to statutory family leave, however the greater proportion of disclosures from women related to ECR status and judgement associated with impact of caring responsibilities (the evidence being that caring responsibilities were disclosed predominantly by women and that this had a significantly adverse impact on the individuals ability to engage productively with research).

Staff with a declared disability accounted for 6.5% of the Category A staff and 11% of the total disclosures; 8% of the defined, specifically ECR, and 17% of the judgement disclosures where health related issues resulted in the individual being less able to engage productively with research. Staff with a declared disability also accounted for 10% of the submitted circumstances.

Other protected characteristics of circumstances declared were analysed however due to low overall numbers, any statistical findings are unlikely to be wholly reliable.

BU found the staff circumstances process a valuable mechanism to support staff with equality-related circumstances. It offered the opportunity to further create a positive culture for staff and to encourage disclosure. Whilst the disclosures were only used for the purpose of the defined REF process, the individual disclosures prompted confidential discussions about adjustments and support for individual staff members. The process and findings will also inform BU's diversity and equality work, and in particular actions that can be put in place to mitigate adverse impact on research activity because of equality-related circumstances.