April 2019

This document sets out the draft guidance and criteria for the institutional level environment pilot which will be undertaken in parallel to the unit level assessment in REF 2021 and is supplementary to the Guidance on submissions (REF 2019/01) and the Panel criteria and working methods (REF 2019/02). Included at Appendix C are key considerations for feedback for institutional engagement workshops to be held in May 2019.

DRAFT - Institutional-level environment pilot: supplementary guidance on submissions, and panel criteria and working methods

Contents

Background 3
Purpose of this document 4
REF5a submission requirements. 4
Criteria for assessment of the IL environment statement 5
Weighting for assessment: 5
Data analysis and benchmarking: 6
Indicators for the institutional-level environment: 6
Environment quality profile: 6
Panel working methods: 6
- Working with the main and sub-panels 6
- Calibration of assessment standards 7
- Assessing submissions 7
- Integration with unit level assessment 7
- Recording panel decisions 8
- Managing conflicts of interest 8
- Confidentiality arrangements 8

Feedback, recommendations and publication of results: 8
- Pilot recommendations for future assessments 8
- Feedback to HEIs and publication of results 8

Appendix A: Guidance for Institutions in preparing their submission 9
Appendix B: Institutional-level environment statement (REF5a) Word limits 13
Appendix C: Key considerations for workshops to be held May 2019 14

Background

1. A key recommendation of the independent review of REF 2014 undertaken by Lord Stern in 2016 was the introduction of an institutional-level (IL) submission for the environment within which HEIs support the delivery and sustainability of their research. This recommendation aimed to reduce duplication across unit-level submissions, enable the accurate representation of aspects of an institution's environment that reflect institutional-level activity, and capture institution-wide strategic objectives and cross-cutting structures and initiatives.

2. Following consultation in 2017, the funding bodies set out their decision to pilot the assessment of the IL environment statement alongside REF 2021 in order to advise on the inclusion (or not) of IL environment submissions in future REF exercises.

3. HEIs are required to submit an environment statement for each research unit they are submitting to the REF, setting out how the environment of the unit supports research. For REF 2021 HEIs will also be required to submit an overarching environment submission highlighting their institution's approach to supporting the research environment across its submitting units.

4. The IL submissions will be used in two ways in this assessment exercise. They will be provided to the sub-panels in order to inform and contextualise their assessment of the unit-level environment statements. The sub-panels **will not assign a separate score** to the IL submissions. The IL statements will also be assessed by a single pilot panel constituted to do so, using the same overarching criteria of vitality and sustainability and the same four-star classification scheme as unit-level submissions. This will aid comparability, consistency and the evaluation of the pilot and will be used to support the panel's recommendations whether or not to include this in future assessment exercises. The IL submission scores **will not form part of the formal assessment profiles** for each institution in REF 2021.

5. The REF IL environment pilot panel has been established to undertake the pilot assessment of IL environment submissions for REF 2021 and to provide advice to the REF team and the UK higher education funding bodies on the feasibility, benefits and drawbacks of an IL assessment, to inform inclusion of this element in future exercises.

6. The pilot panel will deliver the following objectives:

   a. To develop the criteria and working methods of the panel for the assessment of the IL environment submissions, in dialogue with the sector.

   b. To contribute to REF engagement with the research community by engaging with stakeholders and main and sub-panel members.

   c. To calibrate assessment standards and assess the IL environment submissions for each of the HEIs submitting to the REF.

   d. To produce the final report on the work of the panel, identifying advice and recommendations for the inclusion, or not, of IL environment submissions in future REF exercises.

e. To contribute to the evaluation of the pilot assessment, which will address feasibility, robustness of panel criteria and assessment, and HEI burden and perceptions.

7. The chair and members of the panel will undertake an ambassadorial role to explain and promote the measures taken to develop assessment of the institutional environment. Membership of the pilot panel can be found on the REF website: http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1076/ref-2021-institutional-environment-pilot-panel-membership.pdf

Purpose of this document

8. In January 2019, the four funding bodies published the 'Guidance on submissions' (REF2019/01[1]) and 'Panel criteria and working methods' (REF2019/02[2]). These documents set out the formal guidance for institutions in developing their REF submissions, the criteria which will be used for assessment, and how the panels will operate in doing so. These documents are and remain the primary guidance for REF 2021.

9. However while the IL environment submission is included within the above documents, this is at an overview level, highlighting the broad requirements. This document sets out supplementary guidance for HEIs in developing their submissions and the detailed criteria and working methods the pilot panel will use in undertaking assessment.

REF5a submission requirements.

10. The following information is required in the IL environment statement (REF5a):

a. Context and mission: an overview of the size, structure, and mission of the institution.

b. Strategy: the institution's strategy for research and enabling impact (including research integrity, open research, considerations of equality and diversity, and structures to support interdisciplinary research, where applicable) in the assessment period and for the next five-year period.

c. People: the institution's staffing strategy, support and training of research students, and building on the information provided in codes of practice, evidence about how equality and diversity in research careers is supported and promoted across the institution.

d. Income, infrastructure and facilities: the institutional-level resources and facilities available to support research. This should include mechanisms for supporting the reproducibility of research as appropriate to the research focus of the HEI, and to facilitate its impact.

[1] http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/guidance-on-submissions-201901/
[2] http://www.ref.ac.uk/publications/panel-criteria-and-working-methods-201902/

11. As set out in paragraph 4 above, the REF5a statements will be reviewed by a pilot assessment panel. The information provided in the IL statement will also be used by the REF sub-panels in order to inform and contextualise their assessment of the relevant sections of the unit-level template. The IL statement will not be separately assessed or separately scored by the sub-panels. **Units should not repeat material covered in REF5a in REF5b and should cross-refer between the statements, where appropriate.**

12. Small and specialist institutions that will make a submission in one UOA only are encouraged to submit a REF5a statement but are not required to do so. Where an HEI does not provide a REF5a statement, the pilot panel will review the submitted REF5b template. In such cases, institutions should ensure that sufficient information is provided in the REF5b template about the institution's context and should be guided by the supplementary guidance provided at Annex A of this document. Additionally, where there is any distinction between the research and impact strategies, policies, facilities and resources between the institution and the submitting unit, this should be clearly identified in the REF5b template.

Criteria for assessment of the IL environment statement

13. The pilot panel will assess IL submissions on the basis of the same criteria of 'vitality' and 'sustainability' as applied to the UOA level environment. This will ensure consistency with unit-level assessment:

a. **Vitality:** will be understood as the extent to which the institution promotes and facilitates a culture of collaboration, and enables and actualises impact within research units, within a thriving and inclusive research culture. This should be based on a clearly articulated and overarching strategy for research and enabling its impact across the institution. Relevant factors in assessment are: interdisciplinary research, national and international collaboration, and engagement with appropriate networks both nationally and internationally.

b. **Sustainability:** will be understood as the extent to which the research environment ensures the future health, diversity, wellbeing and wider contribution of the institution and its research units, including investment in people and in infrastructure. Relevant factors for assessment are the extent of cross-disciplinary working and research partnerships, external partnerships more broadly and contributing to and achieving positive change within national research capacity.

Weighting for assessment:

14. The panel will weight the sections of REF5a for assessment, as follows:

Context and mission:	10%
Strategy:	30%
People:	30%
Income, infrastructure and facilities:	30%

15. ‘Section one: context and mission’ is principally intended to provide background information to support contextual assessment for the other sections. However, this section requires HEIs to report progress against their identified objectives and to set future objectives, which the panel will assess and to which it will assign a score.

Data analysis and benchmarking:

16. The panel will receive quantitative data relating to the institutional research environment. This will be aggregated from the unit-level information provided in REF4a/b/c (see ‘Guidance on submissions’, paragraphs 337-358).

17. In order to ensure consistent comparator criteria for institutions, taking into account context, size and specialism, the panel will use Transparent Approach to Costing (TRAC) data and groupings to benchmark the data. This will be provided at HEI level and aggregated for the institution’s TRAC comparator group, and will be provided to the pilot panel disaggregated at main-panel level for each institution.

Indicators for the institutional-level environment:

18. In their submissions institutions are encouraged to provide indicators relevant to their institutional context in support of their narrative submission. In particular, institutions are strongly encouraged to consider those indicators recommended by the Forum for Responsible Research Metrics[3].

19. The pilot panel has also identified key areas of interest for which the REF team will provide standard data obtained through anonymised HESA profiles in order to minimise the reporting burden on institutions. Indicators to be provided will cover: (1) recruitment by age profile; (2) professors and senior staff by equalities characteristic; (3) relevant accreditation standards demonstrating institutional commitment to staff support and progression, for instance: Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter and HR Excellence in Research at institutional level.

Environment quality profile:

20. The pilot panel will assess the information provided in the IL environment template (REF5a), and consider the environment data within the context of that information. The panel will build up a graduated sub-profile by assessing the range of elements in each submission, using the levels identified in the ‘Guidance on submissions’, Annex A. The panel has indicated the weighting that it will attach to each component of the environment template at paragraph 14, above.

Panel working methods:

21. **Working with the main and sub-panels:** In order to ensure that the pilot panel functions, and is seen to function, independently from the formal assessment of REF submissions, there will be no cross-membership with members of the main or sub-panels. As part of the arrangements for

[3] http://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1019/guidance-on-environment-indicators.pdf

oversight and in order that the panel is able to seek advice on international practice and standards, the panel will engage with main-panel international members through an initial calibration exercise and throughout the assessment.

22. **Calibration of assessment standards:** At its first meeting of the assessment phase the pilot panel will undertake a calibration exercise using a sample of IL submissions. In undertaking calibration the panel will engage with international representatives from the four main panels, to draw on external advice and provide wider oversight of the assessment standards. This will ensure that there is a shared and consistent understanding by panel members. The panel will also apply 'real-time' oversight of scoring throughout the assessment phase, including statistical analysis to identify and moderate outliers.

23. **Assessing submissions:** Each assessment will be undertaken by a sub-group of three members of the panel, of whom at least one will have previous REF experience and one will be a senior academic or research professional. Research users will advise on a range of submissions, which will inform the calibration and assessment standards to be applied. Assessment will be undertaken independently by each panel member who will submit their scores for discussion and agreement of a final profile within a full panel meeting. The panel will agree a score against the assessment criteria using the environment scoring format at Table A4 in Appendix A of the 'Guidance on submissions' (page 100).

24. During the course of the assessment, the sub-panels and the pilot panel will be asked to draw attention to any data they would like the REF team to verify through an audit. These data will be investigated by the REF team (in addition to the REF team auditing a proportion of submitted information from each institution, as described in 'Guidance on submissions', paragraphs 91 to 97).

25. **Integration with unit level assessment:** In order to inform the panel's assessment of the validity of the pilot, and to inform its final recommendations, the panel will identify and explore the rationale for, and seek to understand the implications of, any variations within or across institutions' UOA submissions and assessments, which may impact on the outcome of the institutional environment assessment.

26. The pilot panel will review a sample of each institution's UOA environment submissions, to evaluate the extent to which an institution's strategies and practices are reflected and implemented at unit level.

27. The pilot panel will also undertake a triangulation exercise with the profiles of the UOA-level assessment for each institution. This means that the pilot panel will not be able to complete its assessment until after formal publication of the final UOA-level assessment. In order to avoid conflicts of interest, the panel will not have access to UOA-level statements or profiles prior to the formal publication date of the UOA assessment.

28. **Recording panel decisions:** The panel secretariat will minute details of the procedures followed by the panel, and these will be published after the conclusion of the exercise. The panel will not make or record collective judgements about individuals' contributions to submissions. The panel secretariat will record the panel's collective judgements about the quality profiles in respect of each submission.

29. **Managing conflicts of interest:** The panel will observe the arrangements for managing conflicts of interest set out in Annex D of the 'Panel criteria and working methods' (page 120).

30. **Confidentiality arrangements:** The panel is bound by the terms of the REF confidentiality arrangements as detailed in Annex E of the 'Panel criteria and working methods' (page 124). These arrangements have been put in place to enable the effective management and operation of the REF, and for the protection of panel members.

Feedback, recommendations and publication of results:

31. **Pilot recommendations for future assessments:** Following assessment, the pilot panel will publish an evaluative summary of its work including formal recommendations to the funding bodies on the inclusion (or not) of IL environment submissions in future assessment exercises. The report will offer a view on whether assessment at this level is viable and proportionate and whether it should be taken forward for future exercises and, if so, will make recommendations for any adjustments to the assessment process identified through the work of the panel.

32. **Feedback to HEIs and publication of results:** The panel will provide individual feedback confidentially to all submitting institutions. This will not provide an individual score but will provide a narrative commentary on the findings of the assessment. Feedback will highlight key elements of their submission for comment, including any areas of concern or opportunities for improvement, or where the panel has assessed the institution's approach as notably positive in any respect.

33. It is not proposed to publish the scored assessment for each institution, however the panel's scoring will inform its final conclusions and recommendations for the inclusion of IL environment submissions in future REF exercises. In order to support the conclusions of the panel as to whether or not IL assessment is viable and valid, the panel may provide anonymised scores in its final report.

Included at Appendix C, below, are key considerations for feedback for the HEI engagement workshops for the institutional environment pilot, to be held in May 2019. Institutions are encouraged to consider these in advance of attendance at the workshops.

Appendix A: Guidance for Institutions in preparing their submission

REF5a Template required information

34. Institutions should set out in narrative form their submission for each section, addressing the areas identified in the guidance below, as relevant to the institution. The key requirement for the information provided through this template is that this should illustrate the impact on the institution's research units achieved through the activities and approaches of the institution centrally. Institutions are encouraged to identify relevant quantitative indicators to be provided in support of the narrative submission.

REF5a, Section 1: Institutional context and mission

35. This section should provide evidence of the size, structure and mission of the institution. Evidence should include (but is not limited to):

- Wider institutional context, including overall size and structure; balance between research and teaching activities; local economic and demographic context; mission, affiliations and peer groupings.
- Institutional research focus, disciplinary spread and diversity; institutional history and development and relative maturity of different disciplines.
- Achievement of institutional research and impact objectives during the assessment period, and strategic aims over the next five years, including a review of institutional plans across the assessment period. Please identify where these were highlighted in REF 2014 unit submissions.

REF5a, Section 2: Institutional research and impact strategy

36. This section should provide evidence of: achievement of strategic goals for research and impact across the institution during the assessment period, and details of future strategic goals for research and impact applicable across the institution. Evidence should be supplemented with supporting data as appropriate, and may include (but is not limited to):

- How the institution centrally has sought to enable and/or facilitate the achievement of impact across its submitting units and more widely, and identify target communities for impact. How research and impact interacts with the institution's strategy for knowledge exchange. How the institution's plans will continue to support the vitality and sustainability of impact.
- How the institution approaches support for interdisciplinary research, where applicable, in the context of its overall research strategy.
- Institutional approaches to underpin and ensure research integrity across its research units, including support and protection for those identifying malpractice in research and particular institutional standards required.
- Institutional strategy for, and progress towards an open research environment; how units are encouraged and supported centrally to progress open access to publications and data. Institutions should identify where this goes above and beyond the REF open access policy

requirements, and wider activities to encourage the effective sharing and management of research data across its research units.

- Institutional approach towards, engagement with, and responses to regional and national research priorities. How the institution supports units in identifying and addressing key research priorities. Engagement in the development of a regional research culture.
- How the institution supports the development of research collaborations, networks and partnerships, including with academic colleagues in other institutions, locally, nationally or internationally and indicators of their success
- Wider contributions to the economy and society made by the institution, including evidence of the wider activities and impact of research not captured through the unit-level assessment
- How the institution engages with diverse communities and publics through its research

REF5a, Section 3: People

37. This section should provide evidence of: staffing strategy and staff development across the institution, including evidence of how the staffing strategy relates to the institution's overarching research and impact strategies and physical infrastructure, setting out how this is implemented across the institution's research units.

38. Submissions should also set out how the institution ensures support for early career researchers (including those on fixed-term contracts) and career development at all stages in research careers; support mechanisms for, and evidence of the training and supervision of, postgraduate research (PGR) students as well as evidence on submission and completion rates for PGR students; and evidence of how the institution supports and promotes equality and diversity, and how this is applied across research units.

39. Institutions are invited to provide evidence of their commitment to equality and diversity at an institutional level. The panel will pay particular attention to all relevant aspects of support for equality and diversity within the submission. Evidence should be provided in relation to all relevant protected characteristics. There should be synergy between the strategies and structures set out in this section and the institution's REF code of practice, which the panel will be able to access on request. Information provided may include (but is not limited to):

- **Staffing strategy and staff development.** Staff development strategy for all staff pursuing a career in research at all stages of their careers, including use of mentoring, probation, training, appraisal and frameworks for incentives and rewards. Use of study leave arrangements. Arrangements for supporting flexible and/or remote working. Career pathways for part-time and fixed term staff. Support for staff with caring responsibilities, ill health etc. in returning from periods of leave, managing ill health and caring responsibilities, travel, and conference attendance. Implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. Accreditation for Athena Swan, the Race Equality Charter and HR Excellence in Research. Staffing and recruitment policy and evidence of its effectiveness, including the pattern of staff recruitment over the assessment period, and the balance between short-term and long-term contracts among Category A eligible staff over this period. Staff progression and

demographic profile of staff at different levels of seniority. Approach to supporting the wellbeing of staff and research students.

- **Early Career Researchers:** Institutions are invited to provide evidence of their approach, and the particular mechanisms available for the support of early career researchers, and impact on progression and retention.

- **Research students:** Institutions are invited to provide evidence of the quality of training and supervision of PGR students and how the institutional approach supports a research culture into which research students are fully integrated and prepared for further research activity.

- **Equality and diversity:** Institutions are invited to provide evidence of their commitment to equality and diversity in the recruitment and support of staff with significant responsibility for research and research students, including the strategies, activities and collaborations that support equality and diversity and enable staff and research students drawn from a wide cross-section of society to engage in research, access internal funds, receive support for submission of funding applications, access research-related promotion and reward procedures, attend conferences and access sabbaticals and training. All relevant protected characteristics should be considered.

40. The institution should also demonstrate how it has ensured due regard to equality and diversity issues in the construction of its REF submissions across its submitting units and how this approach relates to the processes set out in their institution's code of practice.

REF5a, Section 4: Income, infrastructure and facilities

41. This section should provide information about the income, infrastructure and facilities pertaining to research and research impact, providing commentary on variations between research units, optionally including information relevant to research units not submitted to REF 2021 (i.e. small units for whom an exception has been approved). This should include but is not limited to:

- Institutional strategies and supporting activities for generating research income across research units.
- Operational and scholarly infrastructure supporting research and impact within and beyond the institution, including technical and support staff, estate and facilities, advanced equipment, IT resources or significant archives and collections
- How any relevant equality and diversity issues have been addressed, for example in relation to support for acquiring research funding, or support for accessing scholarly or operational infrastructure
- how infrastructure, facilities and expertise are deployed in relation to impact activities
- the nature, quality, provision and operation of specialist research infrastructure and facilities
- evidence of cross-HEI shared or collaborative use of research infrastructure including the use of major research facilities both in the UK and overseas
- significance of major benefits-in-kind (including, for example, donated items of equipment, sponsorships secured, or other arrangements directly related to research).

Appendix B: Institutional-level environment statement (REF5a) Word limits

1. The **maximum** word limit for the institutional environment statement (REF5a) will depend on the total FTE of Category A submitted staff returned across the institution, according to Table F1. Submitting institutions are reminded that this is an upper limit, not a minimum requirement.

Table F1: Page limits for REF5a

Number of Category A submitted staff returned by institution (FTE)	Word limit for environment statement (REF5a)
1 – 99.99	4,000
100 – 499.99	4,500
500 – 999.99	5,000
1000 or more	5,500

Appendix C: Key considerations for workshops to be held May 2019, for the Institution Level Pilot Guidance and Criteria

General:

- Do you consider that the guidance and criteria are clear in their approach and aims?
    - If not, why, and how could they be improved?

- Do the guidance and criteria give institutions confidence that the panel will be able to assess their submissions equitably, taking into account relevant factors?
    - If not, why, and how could they be improved?

- Do institutions consider that the proposed approach minimises, as far as possible, additional burden?
    - How could this be improved?

- Are there particular elements which cause concern?
    - How do we address these?

- If included for future exercises, should sections of the submission template and associated information requirements be more aligned with the UOA level environment submission?

Indicators:

- Are the identified indicators relevant and appropriate for assessment at institutional level and relevant across the range of institutions by size, type and speciality?

- Are there relevant and robust indicators which are not currently included and should be? NB these should be relevant for assessment at institutional level, across the range of institutions by size, type and speciality.

Benchmarking:

- The report identifies that the panel will be provided with comparator benchmarking data using the TRAC clustering. Do HEIs consider that this is a robust and relevant approach or is there a better alternative?

Guidance for preparing submissions.

- Is the required information across the four sections clear, meaningful and reportable at institutional level rather than aggregated?

- Does this approach provide sufficient scope for institutions to demonstrate their approach and mechanisms to support research?

- Are any key aspects missing?

Publication

- This is a pilot exercise to determine the validity of institution level environment assessment. In order to avoid any confusion with the formal UOA level assessment, the panel will not publish institutional scores following the IL assessment. We will however provide institutions with written feedback, and the panel's scores will be used to inform the recommendations of the pilot. Do institutions agree that this is the most appropriate approach?