

EPC REF Consultation Response, May 2020

The EPC is the representative voice of over 8,000 academic staff working at all levels in UK Engineering departments, schools and faculties. Our responses are offered on behalf of the Engineering academic community. We acknowledge that the challenges and needs of other disciplines will differ and that a balanced approach will need to be reached.

Question 1: At this point in time, what is your preference for the revised REF submission deadline?

The preference of the EPC would be option A, but we would support any option on the basis that it follows certain principles:

We accept that there needs to be some delay, but would like to see the process move towards REF submission as soon as practical. A considerable amount of the work towards REF submissions will have already been completed. (Some EPC members report that impact statements are incomplete only because they are awaiting evidence from industry because staff have been furloughed.)

Given that engineering research often requires access to laboratory-based equipment, it is challenging to pursue engineering research under social distancing conditions. Preparing REF responses is more possible and so moving forward with the REF process at this stage is a more efficient use of available staff time in Engineering.

Even so, many staff have increased workloads because they are engaged in reconfiguring teaching or delivering learning online, while some administrative staff have been assigned to other duties. It is important to ensure the process allows sufficient flexibility for different institutions.

Any rescheduling of the REF process should take account of the rescheduling of TEF and KEF and the associated workload involved. It is important to ensure phasing of these exercises as they are often supported within institutions by the same staff.

Option B may not be helpful as different elements of the REF submission need to be placed in context (subject level in the institutional context and vice versa). Phased submission will merely run the risk of apparently inconsistent submissions that require further context-setting.

Question 2: Impact: The end of the assessment period for impact is 31 July 2020. Which of the following options would you prefer as an initial step towards taking account of the effects of Covid-19 on impact submissions?

Option B. We would prefer the assessment period to remain unchanged. Any change would have potentially unfair impacts on early career researchers and on those who might be less able to publish research during the current public health situation. (In particular, we suspect this may disadvantage female researchers.)

EPC would be concerned about reducing the number of impact case studies (ICS) required for REF2021, unless this were to be done in such a way as to benefit smaller submissions e.g. by increasing the number of FTE needed for the minimum 2 case studies. Already,

smaller Engineering departments, where much excellent engineering research is taking place, are significantly disadvantaged by needing more case studies relative to FTE staff than larger ones. This is illustrated in the Table below where the ratio of FTE/ICS is below 10 for small submissions but well in excess of 20 for large submissions. Due to the amalgamation of four of the engineering panels from REF2014 into UoA12 Engineering, this UoA will have many large submissions and also a wide range of submission sizes. Any reduction in the number of ICS required at the top end will further disadvantage the smaller institutions in favour of larger ones.

FTE	No. Case studies	FTE/ICS
14	2	7.0
19	2	9.5
24	3	8.0
29	3	9.7
34	3	11.3
49	4	12.3
64	5	12.8
79	6	13.2
94	7	13.4
109	8	13.6
159	9	17.7
209	10	20.9
259	12	21.6
309	13	23.8