

UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL REF 2021 STRATEGY AND REDUNDANCY SELECTION

This paper raises fundamental questions about the research income targets used to select 47 staff at the University of Liverpool's Faculty of Health and Life Sciences for redundancy as part of 'Project Shape'. The paper highlights the link between the University of Liverpool's preparation for REF 2021 and this methodology. This methodology uses the Units of Assessment (UoAs) that staff outputs are allocated to, in order to construct redundancy selection benchmarks. As the paper shows, this methodology is not compliant with either the spirit or the letter of the REF 2021 Guidance on codes of practice published by Research England.

The University of Liverpool's research income thresholds for Project Shape redundancy selection are defined as follows:

Average RI pa <25th percentile of Russell Group, HESA 2018-19: UoA1 and 2 £186,562, UoA4 £38,099, UoA6 £88,426. TTF/Lecturer 20% of values: UoA1 and 2 £37,312, UoA4 £7,620, UoA6 £17,685

This methodology uses the allocation of staff as part of the University's REF 2021 submission: it benchmarks the average research income generated by those individuals against the average research income generated across REF Units of Assessment.

As a result the UoAs that staff outputs were submitted to in REF 2021 have (albeit inadvertently) become a determining factor in this benchmarking exercise. At no point in the REF preparation process were staff told that the Unit of Assessment allocation of their outputs for REF 2021 would be used to measure their performance, and ultimately provide the key selection criteria for redundancy.

In summary, an unacknowledged consequence of the University of Liverpool's configuration of REF 2021 Units of Assessment is that the matching of staff REF outputs to Units of Assessment has provided the methodology for the redundancies.

At Risk of Redundancy

We have analysed data drawn from a sample of 29 of the group of UCU eligible members who are at risk of redundancy (n=32), to gauge how many in this group were allocated to UoAs that did not accurately reflect their expertise and research strengths.

Only six reported that the UoA to which their outputs were matched was the 'best fit' for their expertise and research strengths. A total of 23 reported that their research outputs had been allocated to a UoA that was not 'best fit' for their expertise and research strengths. These included 17 who have been entered into UoA 1 (Clinical Medicine); 2 who have been entered into UoA 2 (Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care), 2 who have been entered into UoA 4 (Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience) and 3 who have been entered into UoA 6 (Agriculture, Veterinary and Food Science).

We understand the reasons for allocating staff to UoAs that are not always a best fit.

We understand the University needs to take strategic decisions to maximise the returns on the University's overall REF submission.

The problem lies when those judgements are used in the criteria to select staff for redundancy.

Staff have been happy for their outputs to be allocated to the UoA that best fits the University's strategy rather than their own research profile as they were never informed that such decisions could be used to threaten their employment status. Indeed, in this sample, 7 people reported that they did not know which UoA they had been returned to (and for the purposes of this document had to ask their Head of School/Department/Research). This in itself is remarkable, and is a powerful illustration as to how the REF process at the University of Liverpool works: staff fully consent to allowing management to allocate them to the UoA that best plays out in the overall submission and rarely object to their work being submitted to a particular UoA.

It is now highly unlikely that this unspoken agreement will remain intact for future REFs.

REF 2021 and the Code of Practice

We have provided evidence to the Senior Leadership Team of a key example of how the practice outlined above works. This example involves two members of staff in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences who conduct research in the same area and are very often co-applicants on grants and co-authors on papers. Those individuals have been entered into different REF UoAs (one in UoA 1 and the other in UoA 4), not for any particular reason other than to avoid duplication of their research across UoAs and because this is to the advantage of the University. This illustrates the problem with mixing REF strategy with redundancy methodology. These are researchers with almost identical profiles who could easily have been allocated to UoA 1 and UoA 4 the other way

around! They have been willingly allocated to their UoAs for no other reason than REF strategy. As a consequence, in relation to the current redundancy selection, one was expected to generate an annual income at roughly 5 times the rate of the other.

This is not the only example of REF strategy having such perverse outcomes that has been reported to us. At least 80% of staff selected for redundancy were benchmarked at a research income average that is significantly higher than the UoA average that best reflects their expertise and research strengths.

It has been reported to us by member of the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences REF Committee that decisions on the allocation of staff outputs to REF UoAs were made by this Committee.

Individuals are matched to UoAs using the following rationales:

1. A judgement on which UoA panel a given individual's research outputs would be viewed most favourably.
2. The strengths and weaknesses of a particular UoA (for example, some people were moved around to balance income generation, impact case studies).
3. The UoA narrative (to ensure a coherent narrative and 'story' of the UoA).

is an organic process. It has been reported to us that in the preparation for REF 2021 at the University of Liverpool, there was a great deal of slippage between UoAs 1 and 2. In many cases, researchers were moved from UoA1 then to UoA2 and finally ended up in UoA1. In some cases, whole groups were moved across UoAs as part of this process. The whole of maternal health, for example, started off in UoA2 and was then moved to UoA1. This kind of REF strategising is known to be common practice across institutions.

We reiterate the point made above, that academic staff are generally happy to have their research contribute to REF in ways that support the University. However, we are only willing to do so as long as the UoA that we are selected for is not used to shape our career chances or impact on our livelihoods.

Conclusion

As this paper shows, a large majority of the group of staff targeted for redundancy were allocated to REF 2021 Units of Assessment (UoAs) that are not the natural or obvious choice for their research, and therefore do not reflect accurately the 'home' academic discipline of those colleagues. Indeed, the vast majority have been allocated to UoAs that do not accurately reflect their expertise and research strengths.

The University's REF 2021 Code of Practice notes that: "[t]he strength of the contribution of individual members of staff in terms of inclusion of outputs for submission to the REF exercise will not in itself influence career progression nor reflect the value of those staff to the overall performance of the University." We know that this statement is intended to refer to the number of outputs included but there is an unforeseen effect here: having outputs entered into a UoA that may be outside a given researcher's expertise and research strengths, but is convenient for the University's REF strategy, is putting people's jobs at risk.

Academic staff are generally happy to have their research contribute to REF in as long as this form of REF strategising is not then used, against our will, to measure performance.

However, the methodology used to select staff for redundancy as part of Project Shape has involved matching outputs to particular UoAs in order to create research income benchmarks.

There may well be other, unintended and long term consequences of this strategy. If the University of Liverpool persists in using this redundancy methodology, then REF submissions are likely to take on an entirely different meaning, and consent of staff for universities to use publications so freely in REF preparations will certainly not be so easily forthcoming in the future. Where REF strategy is simultaneously used to select people for redundancy, then it is highly unlikely that staff will allow the University to strategise in this way ever again.

The issues highlighted in this paper not only raise questions about how REF output allocation to UoAs is being 'gamed' in processes for which REF was never designed, but also in ways which constitute an unforeseen breach of REF 2021 guidance.

Has the University considered its REF 2021 Code of Practice and the unintended consequences of REF configurations and so-called 'REF gaming' on the proposed redundancies?

UCU University of Liverpool Branch, April 2021