

A ROUNDED QUALITATIVE ASSESSMENT?

Introduction: a revised selection criteria

This paper discusses the “qualitative elements” of the University of Liverpool’s selection of 32 members of staff for redundancy as part of its ‘Project Shape’ proposals.

The original selection criteria supplied to the UCU on 25 th January 2021 was based upon two elements: mean grant income, applied using REF Unit of Assessment (UoAs); and a citation score provided by Elsevier’s Field Weighted Citation Index (FWCI).

Evidence submitted to the University by UCU showed that the redundancy scheme was based on the manipulation of REF data and breached the University’s REF 2021 Code of Practice. Further evidence submitted by UCU showed that FWCI could not be meaningfully applied to individuals. The UCU also submitted extensive evidence demonstrating that the University had failed to abide by established international standards of a “rounded qualitative” assessment. The authors of the Metric Tide, The Hong Kong Principles and the Leiden Manifesto endorsed UCU’s view in public. Indeed, the Universities UK body the Forum on Responsible Research Metrics wrote to University of Liverpool Vice Chancellor Professor Dame Janet Beer to inform her that “any narrow set of specific indicators of individual performance (including average research income or Field Weighted Citation Impact) cannot provide a methodologically rigorous, fair or responsible basis on which to evaluate or assess individual research performance.”

As a result of this evidence and pressure, the University published a new redundancy selection criteria on the 5 th May. This new criteria retains research grant income as the primary element for selecting staff. Instead of linking the mean grant income figure to UoAs, the University used the codes assigned to staff members for the purposes of national data collection by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Those codes are used for very broad and basic reporting purposes and not designed to offer a definitive assignment of disciplinary specialism. Moreover, the process of allocating those codes is inconsistent across the University, and the basis for allocating those codes is largely unknown to staff. Yet in the redundancy selection they were used to determine the threshold for research income for each member of staff. UCU has subjected this research grant income measure to detailed critique in the document *UCU Evidence on the Research Income Thresholds for Project Shape’s ‘Rank And Yank’ Redundancy Selection*.

The new selection criteria also purported to introduce a ‘qualitative assessment’ that supplemented the research grant income targets. In its revised business case, The University stated that it has made a “rounded assessment of individual contribution.” The University claimed in a subsequent public statement on 26 th May 2021 that “the amended criteria proposed earlier this month, are in keeping with the principles of DORA and this has been confirmed, in writing, by both DORA and Research England.”

The same “mitigation elements” that were outlined in the previous business case have been applied. This means that the only thing that has changed between the initial and the revised proposals is the reduction in the start pool by applying different research grant thresholds and introducing the qualitative elements.

The University required 2 of the following “qualitative elements” to be met.

1. 2 or more publications of a standard assessed world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour as Lead, Corresponding or Senior Author
2. REF Impact Case Study Lead
3. Evidence of significant non-research income (from CPD, consultancy or commercial activity)
4. Known substantial contribution to teaching delivery, 80% or more teaching load or programme leadership

The new criteria were applied at a meeting of the Faculty Leadership Team on the 28 th April. At this meeting 66 staff in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences did not meet grant income thresholds using the new criteria. Of those, a total of 32 remained in the pool after the qualitative criteria were applied.

There is a remarkable coincidence that occurred when the new selection criteria were applied. Not one person from the original group of 47 at risk of redundancy was removed at this stage.

We have been told that 3 have subsequently been removed because some additional information has been “found”. But the qualitative elements introduced in the second iteration of the redundancy selection saved no one. This is not only statistically remarkable, but it also indicates something about the flaws in this “rounded assessment of individual contribution.”

Lacking Transparency

None of the staff selected for redundancy have been given any information about the way those post hoc qualitative criteria were applied or calculated. Neither were they given the opportunity to ensure the data applying to them was accurate. Indeed, this is the first time those metrics have been used to assess the capability of staff at the University of Liverpool.

The decision-making process is opaque and unrecorded and therefore individuals can never know exactly how they were deemed to be not meeting those criteria. This all raises questions about when the criteria used in hiring, tenure, promotion, and redundancy decisions should be made explicit to research staff; i.e. is it responsible to only let researchers know they are being evaluated against a given set of criteria after they have been selected for redundancy? Moreover, should the criteria against which researchers are being assessed not be made explicit during the interview process, in contracts, or during professional development reviews (PDRs)?

The practice of using ex post facto targets in this way can never meet international standards of transparency set out in the gold standard responsible metrics principles.

Part of the problem here is that there has been no evidence of poor performance or indeed of any breaches of agreed role expectations identified in the case of any of those selected for redundancy. Indeed, many of those at risk of redundancy report being praised for excellent performance in their most recent PDRs, and some are currently being encouraged to apply for promotion. Staff were not made fully aware of the requirements of their role in relation to the targets used in the qualitative assessment in day to day management or PDR or in a way that was “fair and reasonable” (University of Liverpool Capability Procedure 1.3 and 1.5).

Changing the selection criteria in the middle of the exercise has exacerbated the problem of transparency. The targets changed halfway through the process, meaning that those selected for redundancy not only had no idea why they were selected in the first place, they were never at any stage informed of what the new targets were, and how they had been moved.

Setting the Bar Impossibly High

Remember that the University required 2 of its “qualitative elements” to be met. In the section here, we show it is unreasonable to expect most staff to meet one of those targets.

Qualitative element 1. Two or more publications of a standard assessed world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour as Lead, Corresponding or Senior Author

It is important to note that this level of expectation is clearly unreasonably high. World leading has a very clear meaning to research assessment processes: it means that the paper can be expected to receive a REF grading of 4*.

The University has never demanded this aspiration explicitly in any policy, and indeed, in its published Research Policy Principles, reference is made to an aspiration of regular publication at 3* level, but this is not set out in prescriptive terms. Moreover, the University’s published role profiles do not come close to demanding this level of research performance.

This redundancy selection has applied this unprecedented high target in order to set the bar at an unobtainable level.

Qualitative element 2. REF Impact Case Study (ICS) Lead

A relatively low proportion of staff is expected to complete an ICS. The rules are that one ICS is submitted for every 7 or 8 research active staff.

Again, this cannot be considered anything other than setting the bar at a level that is unobtainable for the majority of teaching and research staff.

Moreover, using the lack of an Impact Case Study as a rationale for continued inclusion in a redundancy pool most likely breaches the spirit of the REF Code of Conduct.

Qualitative element 3. Evidence of significant non-research income (from CPD, consultancy or commercial activity)

This, as we note above, is effectively an extension of the research grant income criteria and it includes data that we would have expected to see in the original research grant income assessment. Income, a quantitative value, is not a serious 'qualitative' measure.

We have shown elsewhere that the research grant income thresholds set in this redundancy selection would not be met by the majority of research active staff in Russell Group universities.

Qualitative element 4. (Known substantial contribution to teaching delivery, 80% or more teaching load or programme leadership)

We have asked but not been told how the 80% teaching load was assessed. In a written request for information on 14th May, UCU requested:

“We reiterate the following question that was raised but not answered at the meeting: What is the reasoning behind a target of 80% teaching load, when the standard T&R contract expectation is 40% and anything over 40% would, by definition, affect research contribution (unless there was an administrative discount)? How was this contribution assessed if no HoDs or HoSs were involved in the process? ... A number of our members have never even been able to view their workload model and any tariffs associated with these models have not been collectively agreed.”

There has been no response to those questions and observations.

And yet those questions are fundamental to our working conditions. The accepted custom and practice expectation at the University of Liverpool on T and R contracts is 40% teaching/40% research/20% administration.

If any member of staff on a teaching and research contract is expected to teach more than 40%,

then this would interfere with their ability to complete other duties, not least their research. If their teaching approaches anything close to 80%, or a teaching and research contract, major questions would be raised about incompetent managers who have prevented staff from fulfilling their duties

An Implausible Qualitative Assessment

During the collective consultation, UCU asked a series of questions about Qualitative element 1.: the number of papers read, who read them and how they were selected. We were told that all significant papers written by all 66 left on the at risk list after the research income criteria were applied, were read by two members of a 9 person faculty management team. UCU were informed in an email on 26th May that in total 412 papers were read by the panel over a total of 20 working days. Professor Kenny reported that she read 52 papers. This means that – assuming that 2 people read each of the remaining papers (standard practice in Research England assessments of papers for REF and in University of Liverpool REF rolling reading) this would equate to 100 papers read by each of the panel members.

This would equate to an average of 5 papers read and assessed every day for every member of the panel. If this is the case, the 9 members of the panel would have done nothing else but read papers between the 24 th March and 28 th April. We are quite sure this is not the case.

But for the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that they if they had done, and that they broadly followed established practice for the peer assessment of papers. The Research England target for REF panel members is a maximum of 3-4 papers per day. If they read any more than this, it is assumed that REF panellists will not be able to devote the necessary time or attention to grade each paper accurately. It is also worth noting that REF panellists are seconded, full-time, by their institution to conduct this task. They are not expected to conduct the duties associated with being a senior leader in their Faculty, whilst at the same time taking the necessary time to assess 3-4 papers.

Moreover, the Research England target assumes that each reviewer is given papers in their discipline. If you are being asked to rank papers that are not within a reviewer's immediate scope of expertise, it is assumed that the grading will take longer. We further asked if the panel believed that it had the expertise to span the full breadth of subjects in the largest faculty in the University. The work of the 66 staff for which papers were read include *at least* 4 different REF Sub panels.

UCU was informed that this panel of 9 people indeed has the broad range of expertise necessary to reach papers across this breadth of subjects. This is despite there being a number of members of staff among the 32 selected for redundancy whose broad discipline is not represented on the 9 person panel, let alone their specific subfield of expertise. This element of the 'qualitative assessment' is simply not plausible. It is not physically possible for those papers to be assessed

in the time taken, or assessed by people with the appropriate expertise.

Even if this had happened, the outcome was remarkable. As we note above, when the second set of redundancy criteria were applied at the meeting on the 28 th April, not one single person in the original ‘at risk’ list had been removed from the revised list because of the quality of their publications, nor one single additional member of staff included. It would appear that the introduction of the “qualitative elements” has had precisely the same effect on the selection process as the original discredited FWCI criteria. This is quite a remarkable feat, given that research conducted as part of the The Metric Tide reported a correlation of below 0.3 between FWCI and REF panel ratings.

This “rounded qualitative assessment” did not remove anyone from redundancy selection when it was applied on the 28 th April. The reduction of the number at risk from 47 to 32 was done by changing the *quantitative* criteria.

International Standards of Responsible Metric Use

Neither can this assessment be described as “rounded” by any international standard.

5. If we measure what has been done against the principles set out by the INORMS Fair and Responsible Ranking Criteria, there are some serious problems revealed by what the University has done under the guise of “a rounded qualitative assessment”. It has failed to:
6. “Engage with the ranked” (none of those selected for redundancy had any prior knowledge of the metrics that were used to select them; and they still do not know how they were ranked)
7. “Declare any conflict of interests.” At the University of Liverpool there are clear conflicts of interest at work. The panel assessing those “qualitative” elements – the Faculty Leadership Team – is the same body of people that devised the redundancy proposals in the first place. They have an interest in producing outcomes that coincide with the Faculty Leadership Team.
8. “Respect the ownership of underlying data.” As we note in the UCU document UCU Evidence on the Research Income Thresholds for Project Shape’s ‘Rank And Yank’ Redundancy Selection, the redundancy selection is based on data that the individuals involved did not know would be used against them.

The process, as we have shown, entirely lacks transparency and rigour, and replaces the processes that are used to safeguard research culture at the University of Liverpool.

Managers should not be given the power to hire and fire based on research metrics, and indeed the use of metrics generally must be subject to rigorous international standards enshrined in the key gold standard documents: The Metric Tide, The Hong Kong Principles, the Leiden Manifesto

and the Declaration on Research Assessment. The University of Liverpool's processes are not compliant with these international standards.

Conclusion: creating the basis for arbitrary power

In summary, there are at least three major flaws in the way the University of Liverpool is seeking to select staff for redundancy. First, the “qualitative element” and “mitigating element” comprise a set of responsibilities and roles that are based on a very narrow understanding of the realities of contribution made by academic staff. Second, they create unreasonably high expectations that are severed from the agreed University role expectations – expectations that senior managers know are not realistic for the vast majority of staff. Third, the criteria, which were not disclosed to staff, have been deliberately designed to give managers unfettered discretion over who they select for redundancy and who they spare.

UCU is highly concerned about this being the first time research metrics have been used to select staff for mass redundancy in a UK University. If this is allowed to happen, the effect will be to erode the standing of a permanent contract with agreed role expectations.

Our senior managers are not listening to their staff or to their students about the long-term damage this episode will cause to its reputation and research. Part of a new process of assessing research contribution must value the broader research contributions we all make: those that can never be captured by a crude and mystified process like this. Furthermore, although the University claims that ‘mitigating elements’ were applied, it is clear that they have not been applied as stated. For example, although it is stated that staff would be removed from the ‘at risk’ list with known personal circumstances including, “Maternity/Adoption/Parental/Carers’ leave/Protected Characteristic/ Long term sickness absence”, there are a number who have not been removed on this basis.

The University of Liverpool is making a mockery of established standards in research metrics and is devaluing everything we do that sustains the research community. If this is allowed to continue it will undermine the very purpose of the University, and could do untold damage to the wider sector.