

For the sake of all involved, we should stop the REF clock

Emily Yarrow and Julie Davies argue any benefits of the current March 31st submission date for REF2021 should not outweigh the human costs to the academics and staff currently working to achieve this deadline.

The UK is in the midst of the worst health and financial crises for several generations and the REF deadline of 31st March looms over research directors, impact leads, professional services staff, and other academics, like another impending dark, stress-filled cloud. As the UK comes to terms with a renewed national lockdown, we call upon Research England who manage the REF on behalf of all four UK Higher education funding bodies, to postpone REF2021 until at least the end of 2021. Above all, we stress the importance of putting the well-being and mental health of all those involved in REF2021 before a research evaluation exercise.

The REF deadline has already moved once – from 27th November 2020. Measures were also put in place on the 21st January, providing [additional flexibility](#) for REF submissions. We see little reason why it should not be moved again, for example, to 27th November 2021, in order to ease pressure not only at the institutional level, but also critically at the individual level, notably for panel members. .

Consideration should be made as to the potential benefits of pushing back the final REF submission until 27th November 2021 to allow the four UK higher education funding councils to demonstrate that they are sufficiently mitigating the effects of COVID-19. However, there are real challenges in a third lock down for those individuals working on submissions in difficult personal circumstances. Pandemic fatigue and [burnout](#) amongst those who are home schooling, caring for sick or elderly family members, with an increased and intensified workload due to on-line teaching, sick colleagues, and various other circumstances, shouldn't simply be collateral damage to REF2021.

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Furthermore, we now know that the REF panels show positive trends, such as the [proportion](#) of appointed members who are female exceeding that found within the wider academic population, with panel members now comprising 45% women. The number of panel members with a declared disability has also increased since 2014. We also know that the REF is a process which is not only [gendered](#) and [actively](#) contributes to inequalities, but that it is also highly labour intensive as it is based on expert peer review, not an algorithm, although data analytics and [citation information](#) are now being used as a part of the peer review process. In order to protect the REF panels, the workload arising from the REF submission and the subsequent reading and evaluation of artefacts, should be delayed with a focus on reducing the burden on all academics and research managers. COVID-19 has already derailed a year of our lives and this should be factored in to revised timescales for the forthcoming REF results. Now is the time for a humanistic approach which foregrounds mental wellbeing, in a context in which it is far from 'business as usual'.



This in fact was the official position at the beginning of the pandemic in the UK in March 2020, when REF Director Dr Kim Hackett released a [letter](#) outlining the reasons for postponing the REF. She explicitly stated that this was to enable institutions to divert staff to other areas “[including for those working in clinical and health-related fields](#)”. At the time of writing, the pandemic is [far worse](#) than in March 2020, are these considerations not more pressing than 10 months ago? Critically, in the third UK-wide lockdown, people are perhaps even more exhausted and suffering from [pandemic fatigue](#) than in previous lockdowns, juggling with caring and domestic responsibilities, worrying about family and friends, finances, and work commitments. Academics are under real threat of [burnout](#) and sticking to the current deadline of March 31st, 2020 holds the potential to further worsen this, particularly for the most [conscientious](#) workers and REF [panel members](#).

Further consideration should also be given to the gendered impact of COVID fatigue, with homeworking and home learning [exacerbating](#) existing gender inequalities and emotional strain for those with caring responsibilities and those living in isolation. In the pandemic and lockdown, policy decisions around the REF and its postponement can be made to ease the burden until life resembles a little more like normality. While there may be calls to ‘get REF done’ and move on, now is simply not the time to do so amidst other pressing priorities such as staff and student mental health in a world of [EdTech](#), COVID-related and industrial strategy projects, supporting doctoral students, and grappling with post-Brexit funding opportunities.

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While universities may be physically closed, their staff and students have not had any breaks in a sector where even before COVID-19 pressures were taking a [toll on individuals’ lives](#). Admittedly, being recognised as key workers means that academics with school age children now have better childcare provision than those not classified as key workers, although in some areas both parents need to be key workers for their children to continue in school. However, stay-at-home orders with a virus strain in the UK that is more contagious than in many other countries and the Mayor of London declaring a major incident of COVID-emergency mean that, as the Chief Medical Officer for England says, [normal life will not return for some time](#).

As [Arundhati Roy](#) writes, the COVID-19 ‘tragedy is immediate, real, epic ... and [has] brought the world to a halt like nothing else could’ however, ‘it offers us a chance to rethink’ and to be more compassionate about how we organise ourselves with self-imposed pressures. Our lives are on hold, let’s hold back too on the REF preparations and prevent further strain on faculty and staff by changing the timeline (like other highly [competitive events](#)) and aiming to publish REF2021 results in 2022.

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