Research Excellence Framework and PGRs

This paper summarises the contribution made by activity related to PGR students to the Research Excellence Framework (REF), including what we know so far about REF2021 and what happened in the last assessment REF2014.

What do we know about REF2021 so far?

- Research England published submission guidance in summer 2018. One decision is for an institutional level environment statement. These will not form part of the formal assessment (but will be subject to a pilot review for the next exercise in mind), however they are mandatory. "Support and training of research students" is one of the elements that will be required for discussion – thus the benefits of expanding part-time options for PGRs could be a useful part of this statement.

- The UOA-level environment element will be assessed on the basis of a more structured template, including the use of more quantitative data to evidence narrative content. Dedicated sections for impact, collaboration, inter-disciplinary research, open research, and equality and diversity have been mentioned to date. Unit level environment statements will also require statements on support and training for research students, but this will likely cover unit-specific processes and systems as opposed to institutional ones, like the review of periods of study.

- Data on research income, income in kind and research degrees awarded will continue to be included in this element.

- Research England have stuck with only requiring the number of doctoral degrees awarded as the 'hard' PGR data submitted. One adjustment is that as a result of COLPROV (data field required by HESA, used for the REF, providing information on formal collaborative arrangements), from 2015/16 onwards completions for students jointly supervised with other institutions will be shared amongst the co-supervising institutions. This applies for both 'concurrent' and 'sequential' supervision.

What happened in REF2014?

- The REF assessment is based around three domains – outputs, impact and environment. PGRs/PhDs featured in the **environment** assessment for REF2014.

- UoA sub-panels assessed the research environment of each submission in terms of its 'vitality and sustainability', including its contribution to the vitality and sustainability of the wider discipline or research base. This element carried a 15 per cent weighting.

- The environment submission comprised quantitative indicators on research income and doctoral students (REF4), and a narrative section (REF5). PGR support contributed to both of these.

REF4 – environment data

- Each UoA submitted **the number of doctorates completed** in each academic year over the REF cycle, i.e. 2008/09 to 2012/13 (i.e. doctorates conferred by 31st July 2013). This data was validated against the number of doctorates claimed each year in the annual student HESA return.

- A small number of UoAs were asked to provide additional quantitative information in their narrative section on the total population of PGRs (chemistry, sport and health); and on the breakdown between professional and other doctorate programmes (business & management, education).

REF5 – environment narrative

- As part of the narrative statement, UoAs were invited to provide evidence or indicators on a number

of aspects around the training and supervision of postgraduate research (PGR) students. Examples provided throughout the panel criteria include:

- o Effective and sustainable doctoral research training

- o Evidence of a strong and integrated research student culture

- o Prestigious/competitive studentships and how they have contributed to the PGR culture and research environment

- o Support offered to PGR students (including employability skills), and the contribution of submitted staff to doctoral programmes.

- o Evidence of CASE awards and application of technology generated by research students.

- o Part of the **vitality** of a UoA – "is engaged with the national and international research and user communities, and is able to attract excellent postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers".

- o Strong recruitment of doctoral research students and evidence of studentships from major funding bodies (for example, Research Councils UK), although sub-panels recognise the challenges of recruiting doctoral students in the current funding environment.

- o Evidence of support for equal opportunities in the recruitment and support of research students.

- o Evidence of procedures to stimulate and facilitate exchanges between academia and business, industry or public and third sector bodies, for example, through the recruitment or secondment of research students.

- o Details of monitoring and support mechanisms linked to evidence of progress and of successful completions.

- o Details of the support provided to research students in terms of skills development and preparation for their future career.

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