

Supporting REF in a small university



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The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system used to assess the quality of research in UK higher education institutions and has direct implications for the amount of government research funding that higher education institutions receive. It is managed by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE), but represents the higher education funding bodies for all of the UK. Following on from the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), the first REF took place in 2014, with submissions covering the period from the beginning of 2008 to the end of 2013. The next REF is due to take place in 2021; submissions will be made towards the end of 2020, and will cover a census period from the start of 2014 to the end of 2020. REF 2014 submissions were evaluated on the quality of the following: research outputs (65%); impact (20%); environment (15%). It is thought that the three main criteria for REF will be similar for 2021. However, at the time of writing HEFCE is consulting with all UK higher education institutions on the exact format of REF 2021 following Lord Stern's review of REF, published in July 2016 (Stern, 2016).

Given that both REF, and prior to that the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), were heavily weighted towards research outputs (usually publications), higher education and research libraries can provide a lot of support for this part of the submission. At Queen Margaret University, the role of Research Support Librarian has evolved as demands to inform both the REF 2014 submission and the planning for REF 2021 – including providing support in bibliometrics, altmetrics and open access publishing – have increased.

For REF 2014, the university submitted to five REF units of assessment. The process for compiling this submission centred on the research publications of the university. There had been little library involvement with RAE 2008 other than assistance in obtaining hard copies of some publications. However, because the new census period for REF almost coincided with the advocacy of the university's research publications repository, eResearch, the repository seemed a logical source of support for the selection process for REF 2014. Originally eResearch was heavily promoted as an open access repository, but there had been limited success in engaging academics with open access publishing despite an institutional mandate. It was recognised that eResearch would suffer from a dearth of content should it follow an 'open access only' policy, so the repository has always accepted both open and closed content to attract more academic engagement, and the advocacy has begun to focus on the repository's dual content, both open and closed access. Mediated deposit, whereby library staff put academics' papers in the repository for them, is a service that has always been provided. As well as asking academics for their publications, and encouraging them to make the deposit process part of the publication workflow, the library also carried out retrospective searches of databases to find works written by Queen Margaret University staff, and new publications alerts were set up to ensure that eResearch captured as much of the published output of the university as possible. The university's Research Strategy Committee approved a proposal to adopt the repository as a formal tool to support the REF selection process and mandated that only papers deposited in eResearch would be eligible for the REF. This was not completely adhered to, but served to focus the minds of many academics on depositing their publications in the repository. As eResearch runs EPrints software, it was also possible to use an EPrints plug-in tool that had been designed for the previous RAE, and then been adapted at the University of Glasgow. The plug-in enabled our academics to select up to four of their papers that they felt were strongest for submission, and reports were then generated using Microsoft Access database software. As well as the use of the repository to collect papers, there was also a demand for bibliometric information to inform the selection process, which again fell under the remit of the library. Citation counts were collected from Scopus, Web of Science and Google Scholar.

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Supporting REF in a small university

The university's REF 2014 submission was widely regarded as successful, and with the census for REF 2021 starting on 1 January 2014, attention soon turned towards that. Particular notice was paid to the announcement made by HEFCE in March 2014 that an open access policy was to be adopted and would affect all papers accepted for publication from 1 April 2016 in any publication bearing an ISSN, i.e. mainly journal articles and conference proceedings published in journal format. The policy follows the 'green' approach to open access publishing, and requires that the post-print version of the paper be deposited in a repository within three months of publication until April 2018. From this date, authors have three months from their paper being accepted for publication to comply with the policy. Papers that have been published via the 'gold' open access model (where an article processing charge has been paid to make the published version open access) are still compliant with the policy and can be submitted as an exception. Advocacy for the REF open access policy began at the university almost immediately, and has been led by the research support librarian. Awareness of the policy was raised via a series of drop-in sessions, attendance at departmental meetings and a REF libguide and handouts; information was also shared across the library's social media accounts. At the time of writing, we are approaching the end of the first year of the policy, and advocacy is now mainly targeted at individuals who are actively considering where to publish in order to make sure that their paper will be compliant with the REF open access policy. We are also requesting a copy of the post-print once a paper has been published. Confusion over what the post-print actually is continues to be a challenge for some authors.

Here, the audit process has begun earlier for REF 2021 than it did for REF 2014, and the library is providing reports again based on all the publications from the census date. The audit reports hold the same bibliographic detail as before, and take citation counts from Scopus and Google Scholar. The author h-index is not currently being included in the reports, but there has been more interest in this than with the previous REF. Web of Science has been dropped for citation counts, as they were usually almost identical to those in Scopus. It is possible that there will be a move to taking citation counts from Harzing's Publish or Perish (PoP) rather than Google Scholar, as PoP now also draws information from both Microsoft Academic and Google Scholar. As well as citation counts, the reports also contain the Altmetric doughnut, which has been in place in our repository since 2015, and demonstrates the online attention that a paper is receiving on social media sites, news outlets, referencing software etc. Online attention is measured much more quickly than traditional citation-based bibliometrics, which can take years to build, and can be useful for assessing the impact of a piece of research. The Altmetric addition has been favourably received by the university's REF managers. Finally, compliance with the REF open access policy is also recorded, for papers accepted for publication after April 2016. At the time of writing, the majority of the papers affected are compliant, which hopefully indicates that the awareness raising campaign is successful. The compilation of the reports is not automated, involves pulling together information from a number of sources, and is very time consuming for the role of the research support librarian in the weeks leading up to the audits.

Though the full details of REF 2021 are not yet finalised, the outcome of the consultation on the Stern Review should not impact too much on the support that the library offers the university. However there is concern over the implications of the recommendation that academics can submit only publications that they have published while at their current place of employment. Author affiliations are not usually recorded in repositories, so there is potential here for having to trawl back through records to check authors' places of employment, and for having to add a new field to the record, showing the author's affiliation, so it can be kept for future reference. While it is not currently mandatory for authors to adopt of the ORCID identifier (a number which serves essentially as an author disambiguation tool), it may become so in

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future. The university is currently considering how to prepare for this. Likewise, though the publication of research data is not part of REF 2021, it could potentially play a part in future assessments, and our support for this requires more development.

To conclude, supporting REF in a small university poses challenges for the library. Extra demands for information and knowledge are being placed on a service that is already stretched both for staff time and money. Alongside this is the ongoing development of the REF, which could potentially change the demands on the library in the near future and further down the line. However, while providing support for REF does present challenges, it also provides the opportunity to engage with the wider university by raising the profile of the repository and library staff, and to learn more about the changing scholarly communications environment and the developments that support it.

References

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