What happens to the publications of the staff we want to let go?

National-level research assessment was first introduced into UK higher education in 1986. Since then, academics have become acutely conscious of the harm that a poor return in the Research Excellence Framework (REF)—or its predecessors, the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and Research Selectivity Exercise (RSE)—can do to a budding or even well-established academic career. To fail to produce sufficient high-quality ‘outputs’ is to risk being left out of favour and maybe even out of a job.

In the run-up to REF 2021, however, new questions have emerged about the impact of the REF on job security. This includes the question above posed last year—or so rumour has it—to the director of one of my university’s research centres by a senior administrator. The principle of ‘non-portability’—the idea that higher education institutions should have a claim on the outputs of departed staff—has raised the prospect that the REF might not only be used to justify penalising those deemed to be at risk of underperforming, but also those individuals whose publications are highly rated.

Non-portability was proposed in 2016 by the Stern review of the REF and has since become one of its most contentious aspects. Like most of the Stern review’s proposals, it seemed to represent a genuine attempt to rectify flaws in previous assessments. While the Stern review and similar policy documents are generally relaxed about the REF being used as an individual performance management tool, the REF and its predecessors were intended as a means of measuring institutions’ capacity to nurture ‘world-leading’ research. Previously, however, research outputs followed researchers, creating a transfer market in which those who had managed to develop an enviable set of publications across seven years could be poached by more ‘desirable’ employers. Early-career academics were also expected to enter jobs with a complement of REF outputs ready for submission, despite their
new employer having done nothing to support them. Non-portability, then, suggested that the burden would fall on universities to develop a culture of research activity over the long term.

The REF, however, is nothing if not a tale of unanticipated consequences, and introducing non-portability threatened to create several. While few early-career academics speak positively about the REF, owning their own publications gives them something tangible to offer prospective employers. It is the hand they have to play, their personal capital, and non-portability threatened to take this away. Non-portability also raises questions about the extent to which institutions actually support researchers. What claim do institutions have in humanities disciplines where scholarship is relatively solitary? In a casualised academic sector, publications can take two years to review while job contracts are frequently 12 months or less. Two of my ‘REF-able’ publications bear the name of a university I worked at for all of three months: can it really claim ownership of these?

Most seriously, non-portability seemed to risk making staff disposable. With departed, dismissed and even—*in a darkly comic development*—dead academics still potentially REF-able, no longer would universities feel the need to retain staff up until the census date. This risk is what generated the most pushback. Indeed, such was the consternation prompted by this danger that it resulted in two compromises: first, that institutions and individuals will be able to enter outputs they have a claim on in 2021; and second, that while a university may enter staff who have taken voluntary redundancy into the REF, it may not do so in compulsory cases.

---

35. We will consult the main panels on the full set of eligibility criteria for output submission. This will include consideration of outputs first made publicly available when the researcher was a PhD student. In general, for outputs to be eligible for submission there will not be a requirement for former staff members to remain employed in academia on the census date. This would allow, for example, the submission of outputs by staff who have moved into a different sector, died or retired.

---

Figure 1: ‘REF 2021 Decisions on staff and outputs (REF 2017/04, November 2017 updated April 2018)’, p.7.
For the time being, this compromise seems to have settled the issue. Certainly, the flurry of activity on social media that greeted the initial non-portability proposal has died down. The submission status of academics who have been made redundant in REF 2021 remains, however, under consultation until mid-October (Q10 here, p. 58). While it may seem strange that the specifics of an assessment that universities are advised to prepare for seven years in advance remain undecided with two years to go, I want to suggest there are good reasons for this. Indeed, I believe the compromise that has been proposed on the question of staff redundancy is deeply—damagingly—flawed.

**Consultation question 10**

Paragraph 206.b sets out the funding bodies’ intention to make ineligible the outputs of former staff who have been made redundant (except where the staff member has taken voluntary redundancy). This proposal reflects the funding bodies’ view that, in recognition of the HEI’s intentions regarding the post, including such outputs would not be consistent with the principle of non-portability. It also responds to concerns about the potential negative incentives that may be created in including these outputs. Do you agree with this proposal? Please provide any further comments.

Figure 2: ‘Draft guidance on submissions (REF 2018/01, July 2018)’, p.58.

Let’s say for the sake of argument that in the case of an open offer of voluntary redundancy extended to a whole department or institution, it is fair not to penalise institutions. Even if one does this, there are problems. Redundancy is a long process requiring formal notification, consultation and often three months’ notice. If a staff member leaves during this time (which they have every incentive to do) they are still potentially REF-able. More seriously, if employer and employee come to a contractual settlement this, too, counts as ‘voluntary severance’, not compulsory redundancy.

Let me put some meat on these hypothetical bones using my own experience. For the last three years I have worked as part of a public policy-focused research centre in a teaching-intensive institution. During this time we have been very successful according to conventional metrics of grant income and high-profile publication (a reminder that, while failing to win grants can cost your job, winning them won’t necessarily save it). Like many universities, however, it has suffered a fall in student numbers this year after
predicting, and preparing for, a significant increase from post-2010 deregulation. Viewing student numbers as the most important means of income generation, the university’s leadership has—as part of a range of belt-tightening measures—cut back on research support and terminated all research-focused posts, including my colleagues’.

What this means in strategic terms is that the institution has diverted from a long-term plan to develop its research capacity in favour of shorter term sustainability. As might be expected given my own circumstances, I do not necessarily agree with this decision, but I do respect my employer’s right to make it. The question that has wider policy significance is whether, having consciously shrunk its research support and activity, it should be able to make a claim on research it no longer carries.

According to current proposals, the answer is yes. After being placed at risk of redundancy, all the relevant staff were offered a voluntary severance package that would leave them better off (because payments are untaxed) while costing the institution at best only a little more than if staff served their full notice (because payments are also not pensionable). There has been little negotiating room, and precious little time offered between seeing and signing the severance agreements. What has been clear is that, while I and some colleagues have the space to consider our options, for other staff—some of whom are under severe financial and mental stress—this is anything but a voluntary choice. What has also become clear is that the university presently intends to submit any REF outputs published by these members of staff based upon an assessment of their worth.

I am not suggesting that under the past system I and my colleagues’ employment would be unchanged, or even that anything would be materially different about the circumstances in which we now find ourselves (although I would not rule it out). What our case does suggest, however, is that under the current proposals for REF 2021 institutions may be able to use non-portability to overstate their current capacity to support research. What also seems clear is that, barring a change in policy following consultation, there will be outputs submitted to the REF which were authored by staff forced from their jobs. While I doubt it swung any judgements in my case, non-portability was certainly factored into the redundancy decision. A
proposal ostensibly designed to support the long-term generation of ‘world-leading’ researchers has, it seems, helped to do the opposite.

It is next to impossible to assess how many similar cases have emerged across the higher education sector. An audit of universities conducted by the University and College Union (UCU) this summer revealed the alarming prevalence of redundancies in universities: at least 1,400 people have been made redundant or had their jobs put at risk in the last two years, through both compulsory and voluntary schemes. Voluntary severance, however, typically involves a non-disclosure agreement which limits the ability of those affected to speak about the subject openly. There may be a number of cases similar to mine—or much worse than mine—that only a few people know about.

The question that follows is how those individuals tasked with administering the REF should respond. One option that appears sensible is that the principle of non-portability should be modified to avoid these dangers by stipulating that institutions cannot submit staff who have been placed at risk of compulsory redundancy, rather than just those who have seen the process through to its conclusion. This might, however, be considered too stringent, or to carry too heavy a bureaucratic burden, in which case it may be best to reconsider the principle of non-portability itself, even at this late stage.

Academics on the other hand—many of us at least—have more fundamental doubts about the value of the REF, especially given the high cost (£250 million for REF 2014) and inherent difficulty of obtaining a reliable assessment of the quality of research outputs. For now, however, with the assessment looming on the horizon, what is most urgent is to limit the extent to which the burden of the exercise falls on individuals rather than institutions. This is especially so for issues such as this: with the consultation still open, academic staff need to be alert to the risks, and act accordingly while the policy remains undecided.

This paper represents the views of the author only. The author believes all information to be reliable and accurate; if any errors are found please contact us so that we can correct them. We welcome discussion of the points raised and suggest that the discussants use Twitter with the hashtags #USSbriefs54; the author will try to respond as appropriate. This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.