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Psychological Society**
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Writing for the Research Excellence Framework 2021: Guidance for qualitative psychologists

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Contents

- 3 Authors**
- 3 Acknowledgements**
- 4 Executive Summary**
- 5 Background**
- 6 Guidance for qualitative researchers on writing for REF**
 - 7 Write to the REF criteria
 - 7 *Rigour*
 - 7 *Significance*
 - 8 *Originality*
 - 9 *Explicitly addressing the REF quality criteria*
 - 9 Positively convey the strengths of (and avoid inadvertently undermining) your own work
 - 10 Think about who will be assessing your work
 - 11 Avoid overlap between submitted outputs
 - 11 Carefully consider your publication outlet
 - 12 Be aware of (and think about how to counter) potential issues around sample size
 - 13 Have a REF publication (and a self-preservation) strategy
- 15 Concluding comments**
- 16 References and resources**
- 17 Appendix 1: The REF2021 draft criteria**
- 18 Appendix 2: The REF2014 criteria**

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Tel: 0116 252 9523; E-mail: P4P@bps.org.uk.

Authors

This document has been produced by the QMiP REF working group. QMiP is the Society's Qualitative Methods in Psychology Section. We work with colleagues across the discipline to support and promote the broad spectrum of qualitative work in psychology. The QMiP REF working group are:

- **Jo Brooks**, Lecturer, University of Manchester; QMiP Chair Elect.
- **Simon Goodman**, Research Fellow, Coventry University; QMiP Treasurer and BPS Social Psychology Section Committee.
- **Abigail Locke**, Professor and Associate Dean, University of Bradford; POWES (BPS Psychology of Women & Equalities Section) Chair Elect.
- **Paula Reavey**, Professor and Director of Postgraduate Research, London South Bank University.
- **Sarah Riley**, Reader and Director of Research, Aberystwyth University; QMiP Chair.
- **Sarah Seymour-Smith**, Senior Lecturer, Nottingham Trent University; QMiP Committee.

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Executive Summary

This document has been produced by the British Psychological Society (BPS) Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMiP) Section. It is intended as a pragmatic tool to support qualitative psychologists in the United Kingdom who are obliged to produce outputs for submission to the Research Excellence Framework exercise (REF). We suggest that it may be useful to understand one's REF outputs as a very specific task to complete, and offer a number of suggestions to think about when writing for the REF.

Write to the REF criteria

Familiarise yourself with and clearly address the REF criteria of significance, originality and rigour in your writing. Be explicit when, where and how you are addressing the REF criteria.

Positively convey the strengths of your own work

Avoid unreasonable claims for qualitative research evidence but clearly explain what using this approach *does* offer.

Think about who will be assessing your work

Psychology is a diverse discipline and outputs will be scrutinised by sub-panel members with a wide range of expertise. Your work needs to be able to withstand this rigorous scrutiny. Make it clear that your work 'is psychology', explicitly highlighting and signposting to relevant areas.

Avoid overlap between submitted REF outputs

Avoid apparent overlap between outputs. Make it clear how an output is original and distinct from any other.

Carefully consider your publication outlet

Ensure that your work is made open access. Ensure that the publication outlet allows you to demonstrate the significance, originality and rigour of your work as per the REF criteria.

Be aware of potential sample size issues

Outputs reporting a *programme* of studies and work are stronger candidates for submission to REF than reports of individual studies using single methodologies. Emphasise the transferability of findings – explain how your contribution goes beyond the sample and contributes to theoretical concepts and broader issues.

Have a REF publication strategy

Have a clear idea about your 'REF papers' and do what you need to in relation to these specifically. It might be a useful strategy to think about your 'REF papers' as a specific task to complete, distinct from other papers and work.

Background

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is a national exercise undertaken to assess the quality of research undertaken in higher education institutions (HEIs) across the United Kingdom. REF is organised into four main panels, each with a number of sub-panels, and institutions are required to submit to defined disciplinary units of assessment (UoAs). The UoA for Psychology is ‘UoA4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience’.

Qualitative research is a core methodological approach in psychology, and qualitative methods are used in research across the discipline. Qualitative approaches, providing in-depth understanding of human experience and context, enable psychologists to address important research questions and build new theory. Despite this, qualitative research has historically received less attention and been afforded less legitimacy than other forms of psychology research.¹ The full methodological range of diverse approaches used by qualitative psychologists (and appropriate quality criteria) is not always well understood by those outside of the area.

According to published REF data and surveys undertaken by the BPS, many psychologists were not included in UoA4 when the REF was last undertaken in 2014 (a BPS survey on experiences of REF2014 led by the Social Section suggests psychology staff were returned to at least 12 different sub-panels). This resulted in an under-representation of psychology research in the UK, and therefore provided a selective (biased) view of the discipline. The Society has repeatedly expressed its concerns regarding potential disciplinary fragmentation under REF, and is keen that the next REF (2021) is as fair and appropriate as possible for the full breadth of the discipline. The Chair of the UoA4 sub-panel for REF2021 has explicitly stated that the panel recognise qualitative research as a key approach in many areas of psychology and one in which many UK researchers excel.* Despite this, many qualitative researchers have expressed anxiety about the REF process.

Although we recognise extensive debates exist around the legitimacy of REF, it is not our intention to address these here. This document has been compiled by the Society’s Qualitative Methods in Psychology (QMIP) Section in response to our members’ requests for guidance on producing qualitative outputs for submission to UoA4². Whilst UoA4 is therefore our particular focus, we hope that qualitative psychologists returning to alternative UoAs will also find it a useful resource when preparing outputs for submission to REF.

* Draft descriptors published in July 2018 for UoA4 (and main panel A) also explicitly mention qualitative approaches.

Guidance for qualitative researchers on writing for REF

Outputs submitted to REF are judged in terms of significance, originality and rigour and are rated from U (unclassified) to 4* (world-leading) (see Appendix 2). It is important to recognise that qualitative colleagues need not always write solely for the purposes of REF, and it is absolutely not our intention to suggest you should always write with REF in mind. However, for those qualitative psychologists obliged to prepare REF-eligible outputs, we suggest that when doing so the following considerations apply.

When writing for REF, you need to have (at least) two audiences in mind: the academics you want to read your work and those who will review it for the purposes of REF. These are, we suggest, different audiences. Both will evaluate the quality of the work, but the latter (REF) audience will do so in a very particular way. They will be reading any single output as one of very many submissions and they will be assessing it *solely in terms of the REF criteria*. When writing for REF, you need to ensure it is clear to these reviewers that your work meets the REF criteria and how. You can do this by:

- Writing to the REF criteria
- Positively conveying the strengths of your work
- Thinking about who will be assessing your work
- Avoiding overlap between submitted REF outputs
- Carefully considering your publication outlet
- Being aware of potential sample size issues
- Having a REF publication strategy.

Write to the REF criteria

Familiarise yourself with and clearly address the REF criteria of significance, originality and rigour in your writing. Be explicit when, where and how you are addressing the REF criteria.

Outputs submitted to UoA4 will be judged in terms of general disciplinary (psychological) originality and significance, and against general disciplinary norms of rigour and ethics. REF reviewers are required to assess very many outputs so try to make it as easy as possible for them to quickly understand how your work addresses the REF criteria.

Rigour

Your (sophisticated qualitative) methodology should be clearly justified within an appropriate (qualitative) paradigm. The appropriate way to describe analytic procedure will obviously depend on the particular approach used, but general good practice guidelines often overlooked include some coherent and congruent explanation of your particular epistemological and ontological stance (especially should you be using a generic qualitative approach not tied to a particular methodology) and evidence of clear engagement with and knowledge of your approach (e.g. if ‘thematic analysis’ – which style? Why is this an appropriate choice?). Although ‘checklists’ for ‘quality qualitative research’ can be useful for some types of qualitative research (e.g.^{3, 4, 5.}) these can sometimes be rather narrow, post-positivist, and inappropriate for application across the broad qualitative methodological spectrum. We recognise that within the qualitative community there is significant concern this policing of the field produces a worryingly limited understanding of qualitative work – but there does exist a useful body of literature to draw on which considers more appropriate ways to conceptualise rigour and judge qualitative research (e.g.^{6, 7, 8, 9.}). To avoid any misguided application of inappropriate (perhaps realist/quantitative) criteria to judge the quality, validity and rigour of your work, clearly signpost (and explain your application of) quality criteria that *are* fitting.

For higher ratings at REF, you need to convince your reader that they can have absolute confidence in your findings. A detailed account of all aspects of your procedure is needed to demonstrate rigour. High scoring outputs will evidence both the quantity and the complexity of the work involved, and evidence minute attention to detail in terms of sample, data, analysis and ethical procedures. (Convenience samples are not likely to score as highly – we will address further potential sample issues later.) Clear explanation and reporting of the study design, underpinning theoretical framework, data set and analysis, and presenting clear interpretations/findings that are convincing, logical and well-supported are obvious basic requirements. It should be absolutely clear that the work has been well executed within the specificities of the particular approach.

Significance

According to draft documentation describing the likely working methods of the REF2021 panels and sub-panels, ‘significance will be understood as the extent to which the work has influenced, or has the capacity to influence, knowledge and scholarly thought, or the development and understanding of policy and/or practice’.¹⁰ Although the particular focus of this document is the preparation of outputs for submission to REF, it is worth

remembering that ‘impact’ is another key element of REF (impact case studies will account for 25 per cent of the overall score). Impact in the context of REF can include a wide range of benefits beyond academia. When assessing impact, sub-panels will consider ‘the “reach and *significance*” of impacts on the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life’.¹⁰ Demonstrating significance is a key consideration and it is worth reflecting on the different types of potential impact that might be relevant in terms of your own work. Consider how you can demonstrate the contribution your research makes, and how to address and evidence impact in your research design.

To demonstrate significance, explain to the reader what the big debate is that you are contributing to (including theoretical underpinnings) and what is going to change as a result of your research. You should clearly state what is innovative about your work and convincingly present the actual and potential significance and applications by spelling these out for the reader (e.g. describing analyses in terms of their impact on community, work, society, citizenship, policy or adoption into clinical practice etc.). Work achieving higher ratings will make a key difference to a lot of people (it should be transferable), have wider paradigmatic, theoretical, policy or practice implications, and initiate a new way of looking at things or doing things that is likely to endure. Note that in addition to considering potential practical relevance, REF ratings of significance can be (solely) based on the theoretical/ conceptual significance of the work for the relevant disciplinary areas. If your work can lay claim to being near-definitive, outstanding, paradigm-breaking etc. then make sure you explain how (e.g. detail these wider implications – might you be able to address international perspectives?).

Originality

You can assure readers of the particular psychological significance of your work by using relevant appropriate terminology and by citing relevant work – but you should also keep in mind the need to demonstrate originality (and see our later comments on taking care with regards to how your work is ‘categorised’). Note that the production of new knowledge is not, in and of itself, necessarily sufficient to demonstrate originality. You need to convince the reader that your work represents a novel contribution. Replications and re-presentations of work already in the public domain, early stage exploratory research and incremental research (moving an established line of research forward and perhaps contributing new knowledge, but building on existing ideas and using established approaches without necessitating a major re-think of basic constructs or theories) are, no matter how useful and well done, not likely to achieve the higher REF ratings. Make a case for your original contribution from the outset – and reiterate this (i.e. articulate the originality of the research in the abstract, in the introduction and in the discussion). How is your work original? Is it the first to deliver a novel approach? Is your paper starting something that will develop – a programmatic approach to a topic?

Explicitly addressing the REF quality criteria

Familiarise yourself with published descriptors of the REF criteria of significance, originality and rigour (see Appendices), and be absolutely clear when, where and how you are addressing these. You should address explicitly the REF quality criteria from the outset (in your abstract – the first thing reviewers will read) and throughout your writing. Using stock phrases perceived as strategically effective will not suffice if the content of your work cannot justify the claims you make for it, but it might be worth considering clear phrases to signpost the reader when writing for REF (e.g. ‘using a rigorous qualitative approach’; ‘new insights’; ‘first study to...’; ‘an under-researched population not investigated in this setting’ – also see online phrase bank resources¹¹ for further ideas).

Positively convey the strengths of (and avoid inadvertently undermining) your own work

The title of a paper can play an important role in setting an appropriate tone, so keep it formal. Unwarranted polemical claims are not appropriate. Avoid unreasonable claims for qualitative research evidence, but clearly explain what using this approach does offer.

It might be that, as qualitative researchers, we need to reconsider some commonly used approaches to introduce our work – might ‘jokey’ titles, titles with quotes, titles foregrounding particular specificities, for example, suggest from the very start that this is not a piece of higher scoring work according to the REF criteria? Submissions to REF should give an impression of both rigorous scholarship and general significance, and the title of a paper can play an important role in setting an appropriate tone.

Whilst you do absolutely need to ensure that readers of your work are clear about its contribution in terms of significance, originality and rigour, it is of course possible to go overboard here. Unwarranted polemical claims are not likely to go unnoticed and are not appropriate (or indeed ethical or good research practice). Do not make unreasonable claims for qualitative research evidence (do not, for example, suggest that it can answer research questions about populations, or questions posed in numerical terms). Try to anticipate and counter potential critiques from critical assessment of your work – e.g. criticisms that might be levelled at self-report data; objections from qualitative research taking an alternative epistemological stance (e.g. from the perspective of discourse analysis). Be honest about what your approach can allow you to claim – but clearly explicate what using this approach does offer, why it was the best approach to address this issue, and what using it has enabled you to do and to show. The explicit use of appropriate theory in qualitative work can be a real strength you may be able to draw on here (e.g. explain how you have made a novel contribution to theory or how your application of a theory-informed qualitative approach allows for deeper understanding of your research topic, and the implications of this).

Think about who will be assessing your work

Psychology is a diverse discipline and outputs will be scrutinised by sub-panel members with varied expertise. Your work needs to be able to withstand this rigorous scrutiny. Make it clear that your work 'is psychology', explicitly highlighting and signposting to relevant areas.

Details of the REF panel and sub-panel membership are publicly available (see Appendices for links). Additional appointments to the UoA4 sub-panel are also expected through the REF assessment phase to extend panel membership and ensure that appropriate qualitative expertise is in place.

Psychology is a diverse discipline and the traditional scientific paradigm remains dominant. In a sub-panel that also encompasses psychiatry and neuroscience, outputs will be scrutinised by sub-panel members with very varied specific expertise. Your work needs to be able to withstand this rigorous scrutiny and to argue clearly for the value of qualitative research and its procedures, emphasising its differences and how these have enhanced the research (theory, application, transferability etc.). Whilst the intention and aim is that the sub-panel members with the most appropriate expertise review individual submissions, you should nonetheless try to minimise any chance of your work being disadvantageously categorised for assessment purposes (for example, might a piece of work on peer counselling programmes with teenagers be classed as warranting consideration as a piece of developmental psychology work simply because of the particular terms foregrounded in the title and abstract? Would this be an appropriate and fair perspective to take when assessing your output?). Take particular care if you are using terminology that might be differently understood by those working in other (perhaps more dominant) frameworks of the discipline. If you are submitting to UoA4 and it is possible that your work might not appear to be 'psychological' to a REF reviewer (this might, for example, be a problem for discourse analytic work), then make it clear in your writing how and why your work is *psychology*. The explicit (integrated, not tokenistic) use of appropriate (psychological) theory may be useful to convince a reviewer of the psychological nature of your work. Ensure it is evident that your work explicitly fits and aligns with the UoA4 descriptors*. Try to avoid any danger of your work being inappropriately categorised by highlighting relevant areas of psychology. If appropriate you should be explicit about the interdisciplinary nature of your work.

* At the time of writing, draft descriptors for UoA4 are available: www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref,2021/downloads/Consultation%20on%20the%20draft%20panel%20criteria%20and%20working%20methods%20REF%202018_02.pdf. According to this guidance, UoA4 will cover 'all areas of psychological research with humans and animals. It covers quantitative and qualitative approaches to typical and atypical populations in contexts including physical and mental health, education, and in the full range of occupational, forensic and therapeutic settings'.

Avoid overlap between submitted outputs

Avoid apparent overlap between outputs. Make it clear how an output is original and distinct from any other.

It is not uncommon for qualitative (or, indeed, quantitative) researchers to, for example, foreground different findings from a single dataset in separate outlets. This can (given the word limit constraints often imposed by journals and the rich and nuanced work produced in qualitative work) often be an understandable, sensible and pragmatic approach. However, for REF it is important to ensure that the work outputs you submit are clearly distinct. Current REF2021 draft guidance states that ‘where two or more research outputs within a submission include significant material in common, the sub-panels will assess each output taking account of the common material only once. Where a sub-panel judges that they do not contain sufficiently distinct material and should be treated as a single output, an unclassified score would be given to the ‘missing’ output.’¹⁰ Apparent overlap between outputs can limit originality ratings and even leave you vulnerable to charges of double publication (which can be perceived as an ethical breach as well as failing to meet the REF definition of what constitutes research, resulting in an immediate unclassified rating). Whilst having more than one publication based on one dataset can sometimes make sense for qualitative research, for the purposes of REF we would strongly advise caution. If you are reporting work from a dataset that has been used elsewhere, you should acknowledge this and make it very clear how this particular piece of work is original and distinct. It may be wiser to produce a more complex, nuanced, and rich paper by thinking about how a number of individual possible lower rated papers might be ‘combined’ into one higher REF-rated paper.

Carefully consider your publication outlet

Ensure that your work is made open access. Ensure that the publication outlet allows you to demonstrate the significance, originality and rigour of your work as per the REF criteria.

Outputs must meet the REF guidance on open access publishing (see Appendices for links). To be eligible for submission to REF 2021, journal articles accepted for publication after April 2016 must be deposited as soon after the point of acceptance as possible (and no later than three months after) in an institutional or subject repository.

There exist very starkly contrasting opinions on likely favourable REF publication outlets in the academic psychology community: we acknowledge these and therefore remain hesitant in making any specific suggestions here. At REF2014 reviewers were directed *not* to rely on metrics, and anecdotal reports additionally suggest work in top-rated journals provided no automatic guarantee of higher REF ratings. Draft criteria for REF2021 states that sub-panels ‘will use citation information, where available, as part of the indication of academic significance to inform their assessment of output quality’.¹⁰

Current REF2021 guidance states that ‘An underpinning principle of the REF is that all types of research and all forms of research output across all disciplines shall be assessed on

a fair and equal basis. Panels have been instructed to define criteria and adopt assessment processes that enable them to recognise, and treat on an equal footing, excellence in research across the spectrum of applied, practice, basic and strategic research...identifying excellence in different forms of research endeavour...while attaching no greater weight to one form over another'.¹⁰ As long as outputs meet the REF definition of 'research' ('a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared'¹⁰), there is a wide array of potential formats for outputs, and current REF2021 guidance very explicitly seeks to 'highlight the diversity of research that can be submitted in any UoA. Any assessable form of output that embodies research is eligible for assessment'.¹⁰ So, for example, whilst textbooks or chapters in textbooks would not likely be considered to meet the REF definition of research, chapters reporting *original research* could (although rarely submitted in UoA4 in REF2014) be a valid form of research output.^{10,12}

Despite this, we would suggest this remains a potentially risky strategy in risk-averse times. We also concur with the view that it is somewhat inevitable that publication in a high impact peer review journal will, at the very least, frame any reading of the material. What you should without doubt consider is whether a publication outlet will, given its particular article specifications, allow you to demonstrate the significance, originality and rigour required by REF. Special issues of journals may provide good opportunities for publication (e.g. in 2015, the journal *Health Psychology* published a qualitative methods special issue¹³). Avoid submissions originally written for a very different audience (for example, specialists, non-psychologists or non-academics) if this means that the output excludes potentially important information and does not clearly address and demonstrate the significance, originality and rigour of the work reported. You might though consider other strategies to encourage engagement with your work (e.g. social media, blogs, online videos, development of resources around your work) – developing an impact plan using such supplementary resources can help maximise the influence of your work in your particular field.

Be aware of (and think about how to counter) potential issues around sample size

Outputs reporting a programme of studies and work are stronger candidates for submission to REF than reports of individual studies using single methodologies. Emphasise the transferability of findings – explain how your contribution goes beyond the sample and contributes to theoretical concepts and broader issues.

Most (although not all) qualitative research approaches use intensive and focused analysis to produce valuable in-depth understanding. This type of work does not lend itself to the larger samples employed in other kinds of research (any claims to have undertaken such analysis on large participant numbers would in fact most likely constitute evidence that the particular approach had been misunderstood and poorly applied). The broad array of methodological approaches covered under the umbrella term of 'qualitative research' make generic recommendations on sample size impossible (although it may be more feasible to do this for specific qualitative approaches¹⁴). But – size does matter in REF. The very particular REF definitions of 'excellence' (and the specific context of UoA4) mean that large-scale studies are more obviously able to evidence meeting the required

stipulations for higher ratings on the REF criteria than small scale pieces of work (e.g. single studies using single methodologies).

There are a number of strategies qualitative researchers can think about drawing on to present and justify their data set as 'substantial'. For some qualitative work (e.g. qualitative surveys), it may be perfectly possible and legitimate to have a more sizeable sample. If your work is part of a larger project you may be drawing on a large sample or several datasets whilst focusing on one particular aspect. Opportunities to undertake work 'embedded' in a wider programme are worth pursuing. It is likely to be an advantage to collaborate on larger projects when possible. Outputs reporting a *programme* of (often mixed methods) studies, and work combining multiple data-sets and methods are better positioned to achieve higher ratings on REF criteria than either reports of individual studies or articles dividing large data sets into publishable 'units'.

Highlighting its complexity might best evidence the value and significance of your data set. For example, longitudinal engagement with a hard to reach or under-represented population may produce a very valuable dataset. Although qualitative work usually focuses on a specific group of people and generalisability will be inappropriate, can you think about the transferability of your findings and explain how your contribution goes beyond the sample, speaks to understandings of theoretical concepts and helps understand broader issues or processes? Consider how you might draw on naturalistic generalisability, transferability, analytical generalisability, and other types of generalisability that can be – for some qualitative research – applicable, and useful to claim.

Have a REF publication strategy

Have a clear idea about your 'REF papers' and do what you need to in relation to these specifically. It might be a useful strategy to think about your 'REF papers' as a specific task to complete, distinct from other papers and work.

All academic staff in UK HEIs with 'significant responsibility for research' must be entered into REF2021 (each staff member may contribute one to five outputs to their departmental submission, with early career academics likely expected to contribute fewer than senior colleagues). Your potential submissions will almost certainly go through internal assessment. QMiP members have reported encountering problems at institutional level, with numerous accounts of institutional REF leads perceiving qualitative work as ineligible for a UoA4 return. It is a good idea to have critically reflected on your likely outputs prior to internal assessment so you are able to engage in dialogue with reviewers. Asking someone you trust to engage in mutual peer review may be a useful strategy. Do some critical reflection: do not rank according to how good you think your work is intrinsically but by referring to the REF criteria. Think about how a knowledgeable but more detached person on the sub-panel might read your outputs. Be constructive but be honest. Not all your papers will be 4*. If you are unhappy with the internal review process, ask for a meeting with those undertaking the review of your work. Listen to what they say but be prepared to challenge them, using REF criteria to make your points. It is good to come across as knowledgeable about how the REF works and business-like about how you see it. Try to talk the same language as the person assessing you.

One useful strategy is to think about your 'REF papers' as a particular task to complete. As academics, our writing often serves different functions (e.g. for seeding grant applications, applying for promotion, developing a profile in a particular area). Writing for REF is perhaps best understood as just one of those functions. Our advice is to have a clear idea of your 'REF papers' and to do what you need to in relation to these specifically. It is emphatically not the case that research not reaching the higher 3* or 4* criteria at REF is not worth undertaking. Such work can be both incremental and impactful (and perhaps contribute significantly to REF impact case studies), but may need to be considered differently to and separately from your REF submission.

Concluding comments

'Excellence' in REF is defined in a very particular way. Some of the many debates around REF include the extent to which REF actually achieves its stipulated aim of promoting research excellence and the arguable incongruence between requirements to demonstrate significance and originality and principles of good scholarship and open science (prioritising getting research right over getting it published). Qualitative psychologists have particular concerns in relation to REF. The prevailing view is that it remains easier for certain types of research (undertaken from a very particular – realist – end of the methodological spectrum) to achieve REF-defined 'excellence'. A key worry is a perceived insufficient understanding of the full methodological range of qualitative work, and the implications this has for fair and appropriate assessment of proposed outputs. Nonetheless, for many UK psychologists, REF is an unavoidable necessity. Outputs will be assessed according to the REF criteria: we hope that the suggestions in this document may be of some help in planning strategies to address these requirements, to anticipate and counter potential critiques, and to evidence the significance, rigour and quality of your work in REF terms. QMiP and the BPS will continue working to address the issues REF raises for qualitative researchers. If you are interested in working with us to ensure the best representation of qualitative methods in psychology, QMiP would be very pleased to hear from you.

References and resources

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- ¹⁰ Draft panel criteria and working methods for REF 2021 are available at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2018/consultationonthedraftpanelcriteriaandworkingmethods201802.html – draft guidance on submissions is available at: www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref,2021/downloads/Draft%20Guidance%20on%20submissions%20REF%202018_1.pdf
- ¹¹ e.g. www.phrasebank.manchester.ac.uk
- ¹² Details of outputs submitted to UoA4 at REF2014 are available at: www.ref.ac.uk/2014/media/ref/content/expanel/member/Main%20Panel%20A%20overview%20report.pdf
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Appendix 1: The REF2021 draft criteria

Draft criteria and descriptors for REF2021, details of panel membership and open access publishing requirements are available at www.ref.ac.uk.

Draft panel criteria and working methods for REF 2021 are available at www.ref.ac.uk/publications/2018/consultationonthedraftpanelcriteriaandworkingmethods201802.html

Draft guidance on submissions is available at: www.ref.ac.uk/media/ref,2021/downloads/Draft%20Guidance%20on%20submissions%20REF%202018_1.pdf

The overall definitions for quality of outputs according to the draft guidance available are:

- **Four star:** Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
- **Three star:** Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
- **Two star:** Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
- **One star:** Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
- **Unclassified:** Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work.

Main panel A will apply these generic definitions and sub-panels (including UoA4) will 'look for evidence of some of the following types of characteristics of quality, as appropriate to each of the starred quality level':

- Scientific rigour and excellence, with regard to design, method, execution and analysis
- Significant addition to knowledge and to the conceptual framework of the field
- Potential and actual significance of the research
- The scale, challenge and logistical difficulty posed by the research
- The logical coherence of argument
- Contribution to theory-building
- Significance of work to advance knowledge, skills, understanding and scholarship in theory, practice, education, management and/or policy
- Applicability and significance to the relevant service users and research users
- Potential applicability for policy in, for example health, healthcare, public health, animal health or welfare.

Appendix 2: The REF2014 criteria

Overall definitions of quality in REF2014 were as those proposed for REF 2014 (see Appendix 1).

In REF2014 the specific criteria in relation to significance, originality and rigour were as follows:

Originality	
4*	World-leading: Outstandingly novel, innovative and/or creative in developing new paradigms, concepts, techniques or outcomes. Instrumental in developing new thinking, practices, paradigms, policies or audiences.
3*	Internationally excellent: Significantly novel, innovative and/or creative in developing concepts, techniques or outcomes. A catalyst for, or important contribution to, new thinking, practices, paradigms, policies or audiences.
2*	Internationally recognised: Involves incremental and cumulative advances, which might include new knowledge but which conform with existing ideas and paradigms, or use established techniques or approaches.
1*	Nationally recognised: An identifiable contribution to understanding, but largely framed by existing paradigms or traditions of thinking, methodology and/or practice.

Significance	
4*	<p>World-leading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Agenda-setting: Research that is leading or at the forefront of the research area. ■ Instrumental in developing new thinking, practices, paradigms, policies or audiences. ■ A primary or essential point of reference. ■ Major influence on the intellectual agenda of a research theme or field. ■ A major expansion of the range and depth of the research and its application, including: major changes in policy or practice; major influence on processes, production and management; major influence on user engagement. ■ Instantiating an exceptionally significant, multi-user data set or research resource.
3*	<p>Internationally excellent:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A catalyst for, or important contribution to, new thinking, practices, paradigms, policies or audiences. ■ An important point of reference. ■ Contributing important knowledge, ideas and techniques which are likely to have a lasting influence. ■ A significant expansion of the range and depth of the research and its application, including: significant changes to policies and practices; significant influence on user engagement; significant influence on processes, production and management ■ Generation of a substantial, coherent and widely admired data set or research resource

Significance cont.	
2*	<p>Internationally recognised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A recognised point of reference. ■ Providing valuable knowledge, and a useful contribution to the range and depth of the research and its applications, including: influence on policy or practice; influence on user engagement; influence on processes, production and management.
1*	<p>Nationally recognised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Useful knowledge, but unlikely to have more than a minor influence in the field, including: minor influence on policy or practice; minor influence on processes; production and management; minor influence on user engagement.

Rigour	
4*	<p>World-leading: Application of exceptionally rigorous research design and techniques of investigation and analysis, and the highest levels of intellectual precision.</p>
3*	<p>Internationally excellent: Application of robust and appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis, with intellectual precision.</p>
2*	<p>Internationally recognised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ A recognised point of reference. ■ Providing valuable knowledge, and a useful contribution to the range and depth of the research and its applications, including: influence on policy or practice; influence on user engagement; influence on processes, production and management.
1*	<p>Nationally recognised:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Useful knowledge, but unlikely to have more than a minor influence in the field, including: minor influence on policy or practice; minor influence on processes, production and management; minor influence on user engagement.

The British Psychological Society

St Andrews House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR, UK

Tel: 0116 254 9568 Fax 0116 247 0787 E-mail: mail@bps.org.uk Website: www.bps.org.uk