#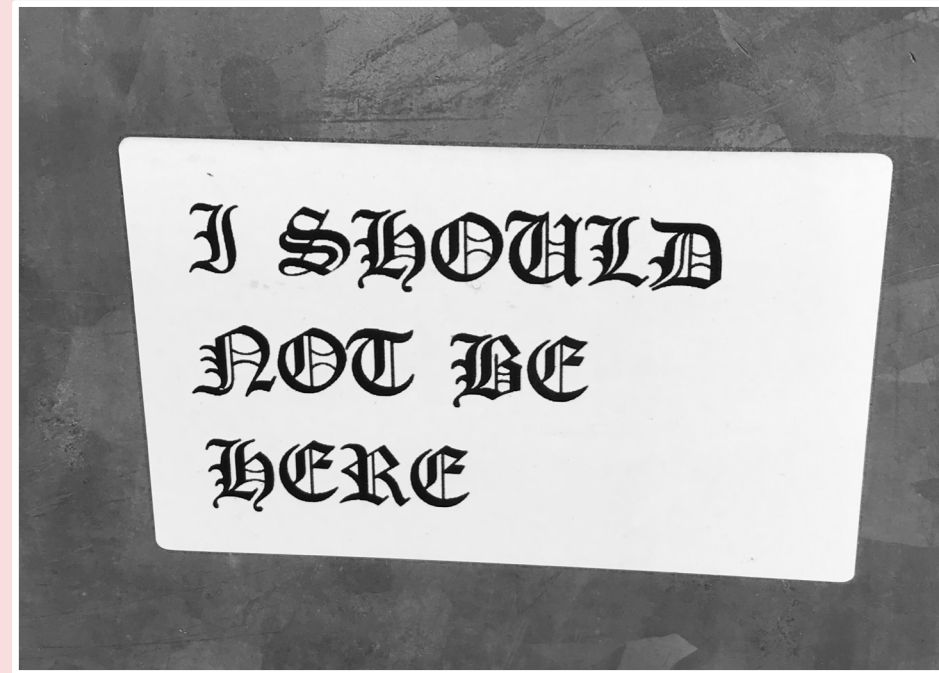 'You get your training and it's basically REF, REF, REF': Unbelonging, exclusion, and the Research Excellence Framework

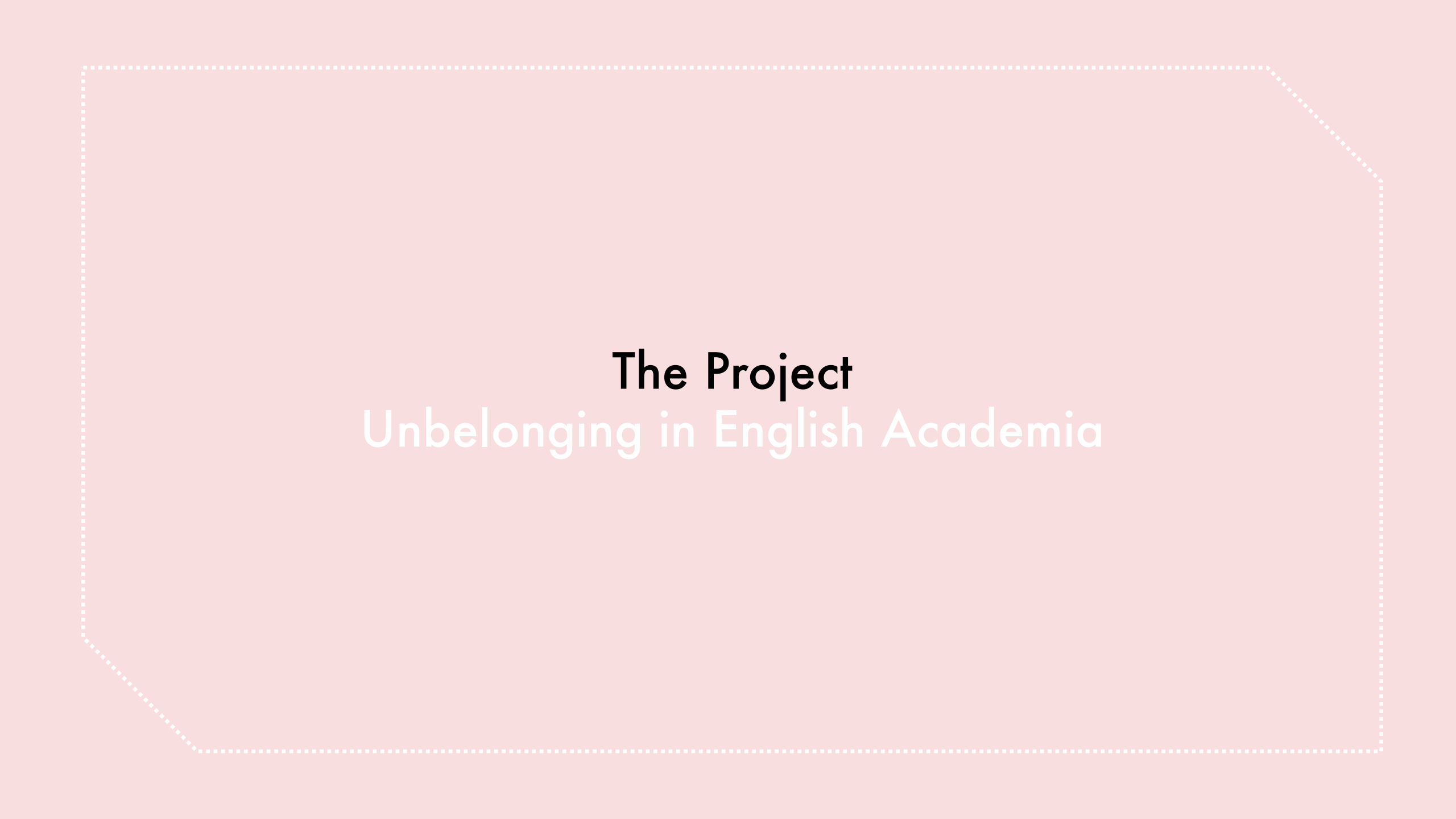I SHOULD NOT BE HERE

Jessica Wren Butler • Lancaster University

STRUCTURE

1) **The wider project**
   - About the project
   - Methods and participants
   - The 'proper academic' and unbelonging
   - Legibility zones

2) **The Research Excellence Framework**
   - What is the REF?
   - The REF submission and scoring
   - Perceptions and realities
   - The significance of the REF

3) **The REF, institutions, and academics**
   - The primacy of research
   - Research and overwork
   - The impact of the REF
   - Choosing the REF submission
   - 'REFability'
   - Outputs and priorities

4) **Conclusions**
   - Alternatives?
   - Summary
   - 'Excellence'

The Project
Unbelonging in English Academia

INTERVIEWS

- ➢ Recruited in two waves through calls on Twitter and Facebook, direct approaches, referral from existing networks, and snowballing

- ➢ Semi-structured interviews with 29 academic staff, lasting between 1h and 2h45m

- ➢ Career stages from fixed-term postdocs to senior staff with management responsibilities, including four recently ex-academics

- ➢ Data generated between December 2017 and October 2018 in three waves: pilot interviews December 2017; substantive interviews February-May and July-September 2018

Gender		Race/ethnicity	
Male	14	White	21
Female	14	Black	3
Non-binary	1	Unspecified	0
Class		Jewish	3
Working class	9	It's complicated	1
Middle class	8	South Asian	1
It's complicated	4	**Nationality**	
W/c by birth, m/c by career	1	British	15
Unspecified	6	Scottish	1
Subject area		Irish	3
Medical and animal sciences	6	Unspecified	5
Natural and mathematical sciences	6	Not British (Anglophone)	1
Social sciences	7	Not British	6
Humanities	7	**Relationship status**	
Arts	3	Single	0
Career stage		Partnered	20
Early-career	10	Unspecified	9
Mid-career	7	**Family status**	
Late-career/senior	4	Children	13
Management	2	No children	5
It's complicated	3	Unspecified	11
Ex	3		

Notes: Some categories add up to more than 29 as participants claimed multiple identities; 'unspecified' means this information was not mentioned rather than actively withheld.

CONCEPTS

The 'proper academic' (or, the ideal academic)

An idealised, fantasy image of the successful, infallible academic who knows all the rules of the game and effortlessly navigates academia as if born to do so - a fully accepted insider who belongs in the environment (and the environment belongs to them in turn).

> I always had this thing that they all seem to know how to academic properly and I don't know.
> Participant 6

> proper academics are like that and I'm not like that.
> Participant 12

Unbelonging

A sense of being out of place or not 'at home' in the environment: disconnection, dislocation, present but somehow not a part of things.

LEGIBILITY ZONES

Institutional: intelligibility within administrative and institutional structures, such as having a university affiliation, a certain type of contract, etc.

Ideological: intelligibility as someone holding certain perspectives on the world, particularly around the function and value of HE, what an academic 'is,' etc.

Individual: intelligibility through certain physical and identity features, including dress, comportment, accent, etc.

SITES OF UNBELONGING

LZ1: Institutional and administrative

Having a job • Getting a job • Institutional prestige • Job title and role focus • FTE • Length of contract • Probation and promotion • Redundancy • Pastoral work • Paperwork, procedures, processes • Publishing • External grants • The REF • Conferences • Peer review • Credentialising • Leave • Working hours • Institutional culture and attitude to staff • Space and place • Resourcing • Hierarchies and management • Induction, training, development • Changing demands • Measurement • Pushback • Bullying and exploitation • Lateral relationships

LZ2: Ideological and philosophical

The 'proper' academic • Academia as vocation/calling • The academic constitution • Academic identity • Academic motivations • Academic ambition • Academic shadow sides • Academic stereotypes and fantasies • Disciplinary and departmental norms • What constitutes success • What enables success • What universities are for • Attitudes to managers and institutions • What is higher education and what (and who) is it for? • Money and the changing culture of HE • Teaching, learning, and students • The joys of the job

LZ3: Individual and embodied

Embodied characteristics
Gender • Race, nationality, and ethnicity • Class, background, and abledness • Age and career stage

Personal qualities and circumstances
Family situation • Social relationships • Self-curation and image • Resilience and stickability • Boundaries and balance • Understanding, experience, and acceptance
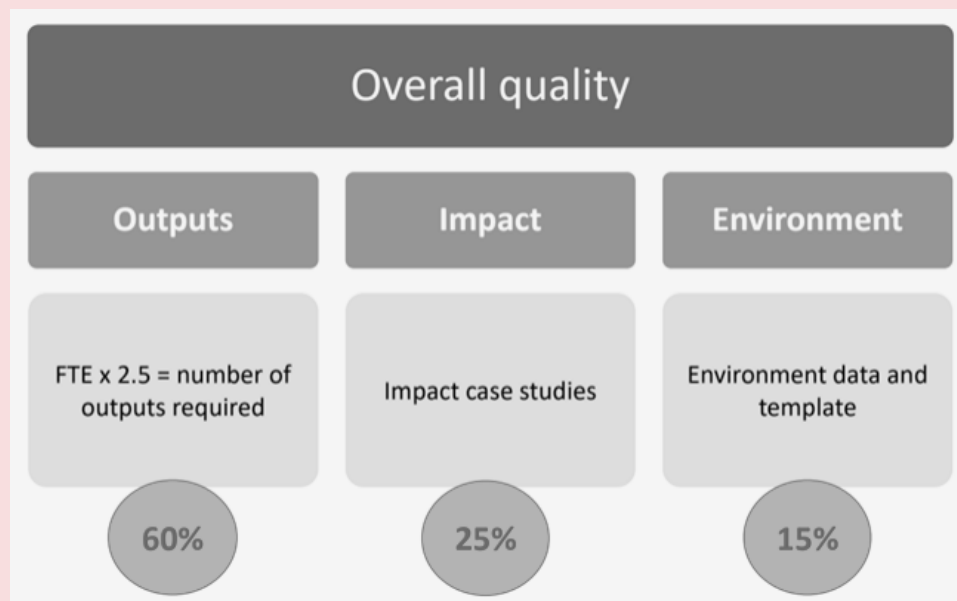
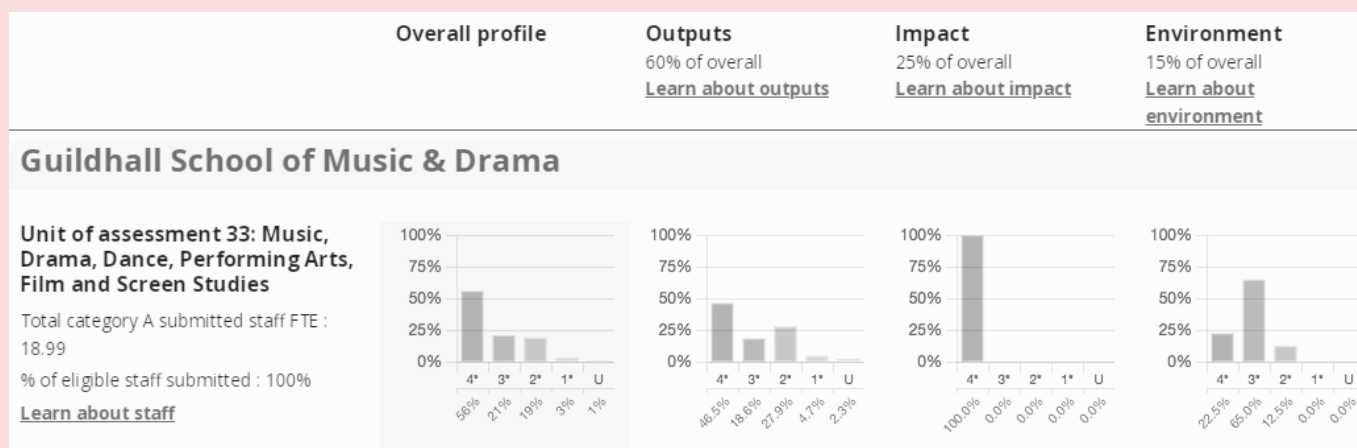# The Research Excellence Framework
(Boo, hiss)

THE REF SUBMISSION

➢ Submissions are made by HEIs to any 'unit of assessment' (UoA) represented at the institution (34 UoAs in 2021) – this may or may not map onto institutional departmental organization

➢ Submissions scored Unclassified, 1*, 2*, 3*, or 4* based on the criteria 'originality, significance, and rigour' for outputs and 'reach and significance' for impact

➢ Formulas for how many outputs and ICS are required are based on the FTE of staff employed with 'significant responsibility for independent research' on a contract of 0.2FTE or above on the census date (31 July 2020)

➢ The submission comprises:
  ➢ Research outputs (60% of score)
  ➢ Impact case studies (ICS; 25% of score)
  ➢ Research environment narrative (15% of score)
  ➢ Staff, research student, and research income and in-kind data

Overall quality

Outputs	Impact	Environment
FTE x 2.5 = number of outputs required	Impact case studies	Environment data and template
60%	25%	15%

Quality level	Description
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. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

	Overall profile	Outputs	Impact	Environment
		60% of overall	25% of overall	15% of overall
		Learn about outputs	Learn about impact	Learn about environment

Guildhall School of Music & Drama

Unit of assessment 33: Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

Total category A submitted staff FTE : 18.99

% of eligible staff submitted : 100%

Learn about staff

Outputs profile: 4* 56%, 3* 21%, 2* 19%, 1* 3%, U 1%

Impact profile: 4* 46.5%, 3* 18.6%, 2* 27.9%, 1* 4.7%, U 2.3%

Environment profile: 4* 100.0%, 3* 0.0%, 2* 0.0%, 1* 0.0%, U 0.0%

Fourth chart: 4* 22.5%, 3* 65.0%, 2* 12.5%, 1* 0.0%, U 0.0%

The REF, institutions, and academics
Research above all

THEMES

➢ Research as the most highly-valued form of academic work

➢ Academia as a vocation – an academic is something one *is* not just something one *does*

➢ Incentive to work excessively: in order to achieve more research-related validations and to demonstrate proper academic identity; not everyone is able to do this

P18: When I sit down and write a paper on a Saturday, I don't really feel like I'm at work. Because it's more of a vocation for me than anything else, so I don't mind it, I quite like it. And a lot of the time I work on the weekend, or late at night. I don't think I have to. It's not like anybody is telling me I've got to.

Jess: Do you think there would be consequences if you didn't finish as many papers? Whilst you say no-one's telling you, I wonder whether, how the love of it intersects with the need in some sense to fulfil those roles?

P18: Yeah. So I think there would be consequences. […] I wouldn't have got the lectureship after, you know, PhD plus three [years] […] if I hadn't written the amount of papers I did, because I was working sort of six or seven days.

REF PREP

- Significant administrative burden

- Internal and external review of research outputs

- ICS and environment templates written from scratch

- Institutional and individual anxiety about academics who have not produced enough, or enough 'high-quality', outputs

- Decisions about what research to support guided in part by REF criteria (or myths thereof)

- Intense scrutiny of academics' output and future plans, attracting particular attention to some individuals

- Balancing the short-term with the long-term; decisions made now have the potential to affect the next seven years

- All eyes on the REF – what becomes invisible?

R E F A B I L I T Y

I felt like I was moving away from what they wanted me to do. Well I was, I was kind of being told that basically. 'Oh I don't know if this will be REFable' and, you know, just because of the, not because of where it was but because of the discipline as it were.
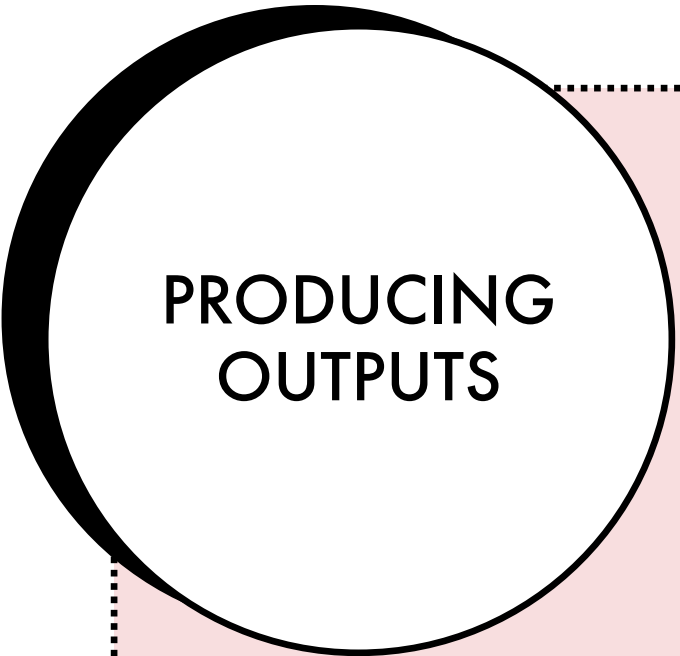Participant 13

people being pushed out of academia who were there, because they weren't REFable enough, like that brutality has been really ramped up.
Participant 14

one of the real pernicious malign changes that happened, which doesn't get commented on enough, was to do with REF2014 and how, yeah, so previously it was all about, you know, rating research 1 to 4, or unclassified to 4, okay, but then a decision was made that only some research would attract, would draw down funding. Research that was seen to be over 2*. I think that's a terrible, terrible thing to happen because what it means is, un-thought-through, what it means is research which we are saying is nationally important – think of that, 'nationally important', that sounds quite good! – or internationally, what's the phrase, 'internationally recognised', great, but it's not good enough. You think 'what? What?' It makes a nonsense of what we're doing, so we have to pretend that all our research is 'internationally significant' or 'world-leading' and if it isn't, if we can't pretend that, it's somehow not good enough.
Participant 12

PRODUCING OUTPUTS

I'm getting my butt kicked a little bit, metaphorically, to make sure that I publish and publish really really soon because otherwise it's going to be too late for me to be put forward. If that's not forthcoming. If publications are not forthcoming from me then I think I'd be in a very precarious situation.
Participant 29

I couldn't believe it, I'd done enough outputs I thought and I'd done them with what I thought were proper institutions and proper, you know, academics and so on. And then after that I just thought, right I'm going to blitz it. I'm not going to be excluded again so I'm going to hit journals, particularly rather than edited collections which is what I'd done before, and try and get a range of outputs.
Participant 28

It's been very gradual but there's a narrowing. Things like the REF. You feel the need to play it safe, which to some degree means you over-produce. You go for something incremental on top of what you did the last time. You squeeze a paper out, you move on to the next one.
Participant 21

PRIORITIES

in terms of REFability, that doesn't really count so like basically years of really intensive work, I'm like oh that's not really what we want and this is, you know, in the ranking that doesn't really count. And I'm thinking but ok this is the kind of thing that, you know, edited collections, something that I use as a scholar, something that my students, like I want them out there, if you don't value them, who's going to write them exactly, who's going to edit them?

Participant 2

I think it puts pressure on to only do the things that have an influence on the metric. So TEF for example, we do everything in our power to make sure the students are happy. REF for a lot of people start doing research in areas that are REFable for their institution or their department, so they won't do things that might be very valuable but are not necessarily REFable, cos that's not where the funding is. It's not where institutions' support lies because the institution needs to make sure they get a good REF outcome. So I do think it puts pressure on. And pressure's good in a way but there are other things that don't get done any more.

Participant 25

Conclusions

ALTERNATIVES?

I think that really it would be better to identify what meets sort of a basic level of a good research design and ethics and compliance to various things, you know. A kind of baseline, a good enough and then just divide the money out equally or do it by lottery. And then I think we would have more interesting research, different ideas. I think we'd have more new things actually, and more new people.
Participant 5

I mean the Research Excellence Framework, I'm not against people having to talk about those things but clearly the whole point of it is to try to make sure that the money for research only goes to some places and not others. So all these 130 universities and they're all fighting, you know, to be doing good research and to have that share of that pie that's too small for everybody to have a piece of. So I would like to see a planned attitude to higher education where they said, 'well as a society, how many universities do we want, how many students do we want to train, how much research do we want to do and what kind?' And then allocate it properly, so rather than making people waste energy fighting over things that they don't need to fight over.
Participant 6

SUMMARY

1) Institutionally burdensome – REF pulls focus, burdens distributed unequally, potentially devalues other activities, incentivises overwork

2) Skews priorities – perceptions of what scores well in the REF come to drive research strategies

3) Devalues competent work – funding algorithm renders research less than 3* 'worthless' to institutions

4) Risk-averse hiring practices – narrowing of field to those who already have outputs and those who can produce them quickly or without support

5) Increased imperative to win grants – especially in disciplines where research cannot be conducted without significant funding

6) Prioritises certain values – hierarchical competitive assessment, 'quality', 'excellence' (originality, significance, rigour)

'EXCELLENCE'

it sounds like really a sensible thing to do, right. You decide what research is excellent and then you give money to the people who are doing excellent things because that would be correct, right. So you've got a limited pot. You should give it to people who do excellent research.
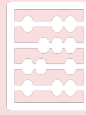
Well this is fine except that, well actually it's not fine. But anyway, even if we thought it was fine, it's not really possible to objectively define excellence. This is a subjective judgement and it tends to entrench the existing order, which you might cynically say it was supposed to do. But I also just have a general kind of concern about the idea of excellence. What about difference? What about things that are just different, or things you hadn't thought about before, or funny slightly flaky ideas that maybe were proposed by someone who hasn't quite got their head around the research design. But actually that's kind of interesting and we should maybe follow it up. Those sorts of thing, you know, stuff that just kind of bubbles up. Because it hasn't had a chance to kind of be polished up or, you know, they haven't had a chance to become excellent yet perhaps for one reason or another. But maybe they've got some interesting things to say, or something different to think about.

What is excellence and even if we could really identify excellence, is that what we, is that the only thing that we need? Don't we also need to just hear different voices and explore new themes? I'm not sure about excellence, because I think it might be meaningless ultimately, and that if you pick something to investigate and spend enough time on it, enough resources, you could make it excellent, whatever that might mean. So it, you decide what is excellent by giving people the money to pursue it sort of and then it makes it excellent.

Participant 5

Thank you for listening!

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@reltubacissej
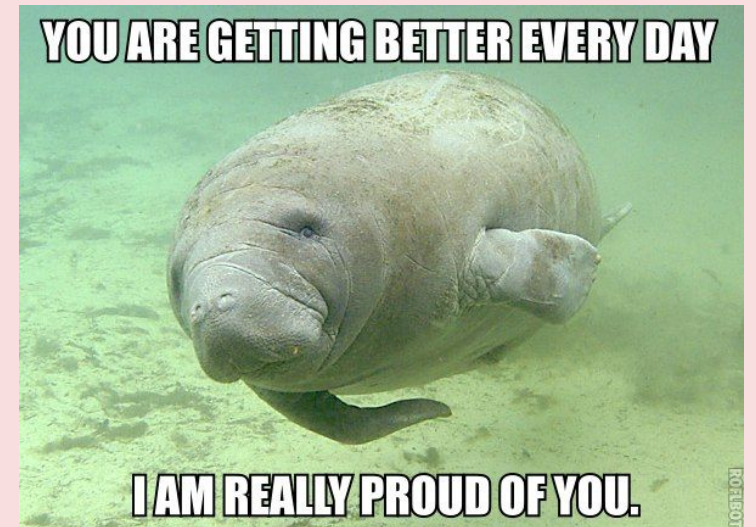
FURTHER READING

What is the meaning of REF?

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/what-is-the-meaning-of-ref

David Kernohan

Do marginal gains approaches in universities fuel REF myths?

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/do-marginal-gains-approaches-in-universities-fuel-ref-myths

Órla Meadhbh Murray

We need to talk about REF and early career researchers

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/we-need-to-talk-about-ref-and-early-career-researchers

Sunday Blake

The REF is dead long live the REF

https://wonkhe.com/blogs/the-ref-is-dead-long-live-the-ref

Elizabeth Gadd

P U B L I C A T I O N S

Wren Butler, J. (2021)

Legibility Zones: An Empirically-Informed Framework for Considering Unbelonging and Exclusion in Contemporary English Academia

Social Inclusion 9(3) https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v9i3.4074

Wren Butler, J. (2022)

'I Shouldn't Be Here': Academics' Experiences of Embodied (Un)belonging, Gendered Competitiveness, and Inequalities in Precarious English Higher Education

In: Addison, M., Breeze, M., Taylor, Y. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Imposter Syndrome in Higher Education* https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-86570-2_3