

Looking after confidential and sensitive information in the REF process: a guide for partners

Why does the University of Bath need this information?

Every 7 years, Research England (the higher education sector's funding body) assesses the quality of the research produced by the UK's universities as part of the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The outcome helps inform future funding allocations, benchmarks Universities and provides accountability to those who fund research.

As part of the REF exercise the university must submit a number of impact case studies that demonstrate how our research is making a difference outside of academia, for example, what difference we are making to businesses, society, or public services. The case studies are assessed by a panel made up of academics and stakeholders with specialist knowledge in the appropriate field, such as representatives from industry, government or the third sector. You can read more about the process on the Research Excellence Framework website [<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>].

Who will see the information you provide?

Confidential information is seen only by individuals who need to see it as part of their role in preparing or assessing case studies. They comprise:

- University staff such as members of university faculties and departments, (e.g. the Dean and Associate Dean for Research, Impact Champions and academics) and staff from our Research and Information Service who support the academics to develop their impact case studies, assemble the supporting evidence and upload it to the REF portal
- The Research England REF team, who are designated individuals within Research England involved in the assessment process
- Academics and stakeholders appointed to the REF assessment panels [see <https://www.ref.ac.uk/about/panel-membership/> for more detailed information about panel membership]

How will the information be used?

The information you provide will help us to develop our REF impact studies, and may form part of our REF submission. The case studies include a description of the research undertaken and its impact, in other words what difference it has made to you, your organisation, your region or society.

Universities must also provide supporting evidence of the impact claimed in each case study, such as testimonial letters, reports, or key documents. This evidence is uploaded to the REF portal along with the case studies. Panels can ask to see the evidence if they would like to verify the claims made in a particular case study, but they are not given it routinely.

Panel members' obligations

All members of an assessment panel are bound by REF confidentiality arrangements. They sign up to these on appointment. Their role can be terminated if they fail to comply. They are also required to handle, store and delete any confidential information in compliance with guidance and any specific instructions from the REF team. REF continue to develop guidance on panel members' obligations, with updated information available on the REF website [<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>].

Conflicts of interest

From time to time a panel member may have a conflict of interest between their role on the panel and the confidential information made available to them in a case study. The university keeps a close watch on any potential clash of interests and we will seek your views on this, giving you a chance to look at the list of panel members where helpful. Any panel members identified as having a conflict of interest will not receive a copy of the case study or be present when it is discussed by the panel. If the Chair of a sub-panel has a conflict of interest then they will excuse themselves from the process and the deputy will chair the discussion.

As a further safeguard, sub-panel chairs may identify specific panel members with a potential conflict of interest – and they will see either a redacted version of the case study, or if that is insufficient, they will not see a copy at all.

How will confidential information be protected?

Data collection, storage and processing systems within the university and REF team are fully compliant with General Data Protection Rules (GDPR) and our confidentiality obligations undertaken by contract with other organisations, such as NDAs with collaborating companies. Only secure systems are used to process and share confidential information and personal data.

The Research England team will only share confidential reports or information with those involved in the assessment process. Within the university, we will share confidential reports or information only with designated members of staff who need to see the information as part of preparing the case study. In these circumstances, the university will ensure that employees undertake to keep such information confidential and use it only for the purposes of REF.

If you need further reassurances about how we will protect your information we can look into drawing up a Non-Disclosure Agreement (NDA), to ensure all confidentiality arrangements are legally binding.

Will the case study be published?

Case studies are made publically available by Research England. However, any sensitive or confidential information is redacted, or where necessary, the case study is not published. If you would like this to be considered, then please do let us know before December 2019.

How long is the information kept?

All case studies containing confidential information are destroyed by Research England once the assessment process is complete. Unless we hear otherwise from you, the university will keep any sensitive or confidential information in line with GDPR and/or existing confidentiality obligations. If you request it, we will return or destroy any sensitive or confidential information except one copy of the case study. This will be kept securely, in line with our confidentiality procedures.

Do I have a say in what is included in the ICS?

We will consult with you as we develop the case study. And you'll have the opportunity to feedback any comments about its accuracy or amendments needed to protect confidentiality before its submission.

Will I be personally identifiable?

Only your title and organisation will be included in the text of the case study. However, your name may be included in the corroborating evidence, for example, if you provided a testimonial letter this will be submitted as part of our supporting evidence.

What if the information relates to national security?

Where a case study includes sensitive national security information Research England undertake to ensure only panel members with appropriate security clearance will see the case study. No details about these case studies are published.

All information is transferred securely, using password protected systems. This is also the case at the University, where only staff with appropriate security clearance will see sensitive case studies, and all information will be stored and transferred securely.

Where can I go for more information?

If you require more information then please contact a member of the Research Impact Team at research-impact@bath.ac.uk

If you would like to find out more about the Research Excellence Framework, please visit <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>