



REF2021: REFLECTIONS FROM THE CLASSICS SUB-PANEL

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The [Research Excellence Framework](#) (REF), undertaken by the UK's four HE funding bodies, provides a review and assessment of research in higher education in order to allocate Quality Related (QR) funding to universities. REF results are reviewed and discussed within universities and within the UK research councils, and inform research planning, staffing and other strategic activities undertaken by these bodies as well as by governments, charities and other research funders. The results of the latest assessment (REF2021) were published on 12 May 2022. Results for the [Classics Sub-panel for REF2021 are available here](#).

In this blog, Professors **Maria Wyke** (Chair), **Barbara Borg** (Deputy Chair), and **Lin Foxhall** (Interdisciplinary adviser) provide some reflections on the assessment exercise and the outcomes for Classics (including general observations on what tended to work well and what did not in submissions), and offer an overview of what the landscape of Classics research looks like.

Our reflections summarise both the Classics Sub-panel report and the open webinar held for the Classics community on 14 June 2022, hosted by the Institute of Classical Studies. A further event will be held at the ICS on 4 July 2022 for Classics Heads of Departments and Research leads to discuss informally the future of Classics beyond REF2021.

ABOUT THE REF2021 PROCESS

REF is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions and is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies. The REF team, based at Research England, managed the process on their behalf. It was carried out by expert panels for each of the 34 subject-based units of assessment under the guidance of the four Main Panels. Classics constituted Sub-panel 29 and fell under the oversight of Main Panel D (Arts and Humanities).

REF 2021 was delivered across three key phases. The preparation phase (2017-19) included detailed consultation with the sector on the implementation of the



recommendations in the Stern review, the appointment and first rounds of meetings of the expert panels, and the publication of the final guidance and criteria. During the submission phase (2019-2021), the REF team supported HEIs with their submission preparations, panels identified the need for further appointments and began to plan their schedules for assessment. From March 2020 onwards, REF engaged with the sector on mitigations to take account of Covid-19, leading to the revised submission date of March 2021. The assessment phase lasted from April 2021 to March 2022, during which the panels reviewed the submissions.

For each submission made by an HEI, Sub-panels (SPs) produced an overall quality profile that showed the proportion of activity judged at each of the four starred quality levels (and unclassified). These overall profiles are the primary outcome of the assessment. Each overall profile is made up from the three sub-profiles (weighted at 60% for Outputs, 25% for Impact, and 15% for Environment). Outputs were assessed according to the criteria of 'originality, significance and rigour', Impact according to 'reach and significance'. The criteria of 'vitality and sustainability' were applied to assess Environment. Each submission returned an environment template and supporting data on doctoral degrees awarded and research income. Panels reviewed the template, taking account of that data, and using the HEI-level environment statement (ILES) to contextualise and inform the review. Outputs, Impact and Environment were all scored against four starred quality levels (4*, 3*, 2*, 1* or ranked as unclassified). The interpretation and application of these generic level definitions specific to Main Panel D can be found in the REF document 2019/02 (January 2019) [Panel Criteria and Working Methods](#), pp. 38-40. Half-marks were utilised for impact case studies and for sections of the environment statement judged on the borderline between two levels because the scoring of their many elements required more nuancing than for outputs.

The work of the four Main Panels and 34 SPs was supported by two advisory panels. The Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) reviewed staff circumstances and provided advice on, particularly, the 'People' section of the environment narrative. The Interdisciplinary Advisory Panel (IDAP) supported the work of the panels with advice on the measures to ensure the equitable assessment of interdisciplinary research. Reports from each of the two advisory panels are being published over the summer on the REF2021 website, providing detail at Main Panel (rather than SP) level. The published data will not identify individuals or submitting HEIs. The role of each Main Panel in the assessment phase was to provide leadership and guidance to its group of SPs, ensuring that the panel criteria and working methods were consistently applied across all SPs within their remit.

Our Classics SP comprised: 13 academic members (8 female, 5 male) two of whom were also designated interdisciplinary advisers; 2 impact assessors (both female); and 4 special advisers (all male). Together the members of our SP encompassed a broad range of expertise. Both a Main Panel D international adviser and a research user also attended a number of our meetings. We were supported throughout by an executive team who were present at every zoom meeting.

The allocation of readers to the three elements of assessment was primarily driven

by expertise. Each submission was assessed by a range of SP members and then discussed and signed off by the whole SP. Any challenging cases were discussed and decided upon in plenary. Where necessary, outputs were cross-referred to or jointly assessed with other SPs. Unconscious bias was managed through initial training and the active use of Bias Mitigation and Intention Plans. We reviewed the Classics Plan at every meeting. Conflicts of interest were logged and panellists did not participate in the assessment of any material with which they had a conflict. Initial calibration was undertaken within each SP, across Main Panel D and between Main Panels for each of the assessment elements. Moderation was an on-going process throughout the assessment, with scoring profiles monitored between meetings, discussed at meetings and kept under review as they emerged. International and User members of Main Panel D were very active in ensuring the consistent application of the assessment criteria across all the Sub panels, including Classics.

SUMMARY OF CLASSICS UOA SUBMISSIONS

Main Panel D submissions

REF2021

UOA	Submissions	Cat A staff (headcount)	Cat A staff (FTE)	Outputs submitted	Impact case studies
25 - Area Studies	23	616	579.82	1,432	65
26 - Modern Languages and Linguistics	47	1,688	1,614.50	3,877	161
27 - English Language and Literature	92	2,903	2,671.31	6,519	279
28 - History	81	2,472	2,360.21	5,766	248
29 - Classics	17	463	448.43	1,070	49
30 - Philosophy	35	734	692.00	1,707	87
31 - Theology and Religious Studies	31	550	505.12	1,247	74
32 - Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory	86	3,169	2,607.19	6,388	269
33 - Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies	84	1,712	1,523.27	3,707	197
34 - Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management	58	1,392	1,302.69	3,207	149
Main panel D	554	15,699	14,304.54	34,920	1,578

The Classics SP received 17 submissions from HEIs (22 in 2014). The size of submissions ranged from 12.5 to 91 FTE with a total of 448 FTE staff submitted, (383 in 2014). In total, 1,707 outputs were directly submitted to Classics (1,388 in REF2014) and 198 outputs were cross-referred into the SP. Not all directly submitted outputs were assessed as some were reserves. 49 impact case studies were assessed (59 in 2014). There were no small submissions and relatively little increase over REF 2014 in the proportion of eligible staff submitted (+17%). Smaller Classics groupings have generally been subsumed by their HEIs into units covering multiple disciplines which have been submitted to other SPs. This has been a trend in Classics for some time but is especially noticeable between REF 2014 and REF 2021, with a corresponding decrease in units submitted to the Classics SP 29 and an increase of 15.8% in the number of outputs cross-referred to it by other SPs.

Main Panel D average profiles

REF2021

FTE-weighted average overall profile

UOA	UOA name	4*	3*	2*	1*	U/c
25	Area Studies	44	42	13	1	0
26	Modern Languages and Linguistics	41	40	18	1	0
27	English Language and Literature	48	39	12	1	0
28	History	43	37	18	2	0
29	Classics	45	39	15	1	0
30	Philosophy	40	41	17	2	0
31	Theology and Religious Studies	38	41	19	2	0
32	Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory	37	41	19	3	0
33	Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies	39	36	20	4	1
34	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management	38	41	19	2	0

The average profile for Classics places it second highest in Main Panel D if ranked by 4* alone (behind English), and third if ranked by 4* + 3* (behind English and Area Studies). Classics might be expected to sit at this end of the Main Panel average profiles for several reasons. All the submissions returned to the Classics SP were from research intensive universities, a high proportion of which are in the Russell Group. In these mainly medium-sized units, almost all staff are well-supported and active researchers. The Classics SP was pleased to observe the high quality demonstrated by the units submitting to it across all three elements of the assessment.

OUTPUTS

The average output sub-profile for Classics was as follows:

%4*	%3*	%2*	%1*	%Unclassified
41.8	39	16.6	2.4	0.2

Every output was graded on a 5-point scale from 0 to 4. If required, additional expertise was obtained through discussion with a wider group of SP members, the service of our specialist advisers or joint assessment with a member from another SP. All 50 requests from HEIs for cross-referral out were accepted. Scores returned for outputs referred out to other SPs for expert advice or jointly assessed between SPs (71 in total) were scrutinised and scoring profiles were cross-checked against those for outputs assessed internally.

We are aware that our SP did not see the full range of work done in Classics not least because, under the new Stern rules, units have had considerable scope for selection from among the publications submitted staff have produced in this REF cycle. Additionally, much Classics research was submitted to and assessed by other SPs with relevant expertise, such as SP 15 (Archaeology), SP 28 (History) and SP



30 (Philosophy).

Submissions to the Classics SP were again dominated by monographs, journal articles, chapters in books, edited collections and scholarly editions. Other output types included working and conference papers, an exhibition, research data sets and software. There were very few standalone translations, although some editions and commentaries included translations that were considered to have contributed positively towards their significance.

Outputs of world-leading quality were produced by scholars at every career stage (including early career researchers) and by both those writing in English and those writing in other languages. Work of world-leading quality was found in diverse output types, in all sizes of submitting unit and spread widely across the sub-fields of Classics. The SP assessed the quality of outputs irrespective of the form, mode, or place of publication or means of dissemination.

Lower scoring outputs fell into several categories. Many contained only a small amount of material that met the REF criteria for research. These often, but not always, appeared to be addressed to students (such as works of survey or synthesis whether short- or long-form). Some outputs demonstrated considerable or even outstanding rigour but did not appear to answer specific research questions. Others demonstrated considerable originality (such as the publication of previously unknown or neglected material) but little significance. Edited volumes did not always score highly. Where a submitting editor's chapter did not support a high score by itself, a high score could still be achieved if the introduction provided a detailed explanation of how the volume's concept and choice of chapters contributed to its originality and significance. Some book chapters were clearly enhanced by consideration of the volume's unifying theme; but others were weakened by the need to focus on it. Units did not always signal overlap between work submitted. Grades were adjusted for those outputs in accordance with the principles set out in the REF 'Guidance on Submissions'. A very small number of outputs were graded as unclassified because they were judged not to meet the REF definition of research at all.

The criteria for approving double-weighting were discussed at the beginning of and throughout the assessment process. Challenging cases were considered by the SP in plenary. 246 requests for double-weighting were made, representing 23% of outputs submitted (almost double the 12% of outputs submitted to Classics in REF 2014). The SP accepted 99% of the double-weighting requests made to it. Requests made per submitting unit ranged from 5% to 45%. Double-weighted outputs tended to score well but were also represented in each of the lower scoring bands above U. In the latter cases, the output often met the double-weighting criteria of scale and/or scope, and mostly the criterion of rigour, but failed to demonstrate research that was sufficiently significant or original.

Few outputs had been flagged as interdisciplinary by HEIs, consequently the Classics SP sought to identify outputs as interdisciplinary for itself and, thus, to monitor their assessment. Interdisciplinary outputs were understood as those that contained outward-facing expertise unusual for Classics, did not represent sub-disciplinary combinations long established within Classics, and offered dialogue or

engagement with other disciplines in novel ways. On that basis, around 25% of outputs submitted to Classics had notable interdisciplinary aspects (a marked growth in this cycle). We were gratified to find that the scoring profile for outputs identified as IDR by either HEIs or the SP was comparable to that for outputs as a whole. World-leading and internationally excellent interdisciplinary research was identified in all areas of Classics.

IMPACT

The average Impact sub-profile for Classics was as follows:

%4*	%3*	%2*	%1*	%Unclassified
47.7	41.2	11.1	0	0

Every impact case study was assessed in detail by three SP members (two academics and one research user) and graded on a nine-point scale consisting of integer and half-integer scores from 0 to 4. Further expertise was sought for challenging cases, and all impact case study scores were signed off in plenary.

The impact of Classics research submitted to our SP is buoyant and wide-reaching, exhibiting even greater variety and ingenuity than in the last REF. The SP was impressed by the breadth of national and international reach of Classics' impact (including in challenging locations), by the diversity of its beneficiaries and by the degree of its significance for those who collaborated, co-created, co-produced or participated in impact activities. This included engagement with Classics research by some of the most marginalised or underserved individuals and groups, supporting them to achieve significant improvements in their lives and prospects, especially in relation to education, mental health, identity and well-being.

In the best impact case studies, the findings of the underpinning research were described in detail and connected sufficiently distinctly and materially to the impact claimed. Where there were varied impacts, they supported each other and contributed to enriching the whole. Substantial evidence was clearly presented to demonstrate real, measurable and beneficial change. Testimonials were often targeted well to document benefit to individuals or organisations and, in the case of professionals, to confirm broader benefits. Good testimonials focused on what participants learned or how their understanding was developed, not just on the pleasure of their experience. Quantitative data were used effectively. The nature of any engagement with partners/collaborators was clearly demonstrated. Sustained and close partnerships might limit reach but often appeared to deepen significance. Weaker case studies did not fulfil their potential because they: (a) listed some underpinning research that did not appear to have any correspondence with impacts claimed; (b) included too many impacts (either of uneven quality or of very diverse types which did not inform, relate clearly to, or enhance each other); (c) overclaimed; (d) lacked adequate supporting evidence or data; (e) contained links out to other material which should have been presented instead within the template.

Three key patterns of activity emerged in the impact case studies submitted to the Classics Sup-panel: (a) As the discipline of Classics has itself democratised (interrogating the legacies of the classical world, expanding its reach, widening knowledge of and access to it for many new audiences), so too is it serving as a democratising force more broadly. (b) The discipline is acknowledging its obligation to rethink and realign the cultural connections it has historically accumulated and stimulated in colonial and post-colonial contexts. Some of our outstanding impact involves engaging with local stakeholders and their diasporas and co-creating with them activities of benefit to their communities and societies. (c) Classicists are successfully deploying the impact that they generate from their research to address and combat pressing social challenges, such as: inequality and exclusion, poverty, sustainability, gender, religious and ethnic identities and discrimination, mental health and wellbeing, slavery, colonialism and their legacies, and political extremism.

ENVIRONMENT

The average Environment sub-profile for Classics was as follows:

%4*	%3*	%2*	%1*	%Unclassified
49.8	41	9.2	0	0

Environment statements were read by a team of three academic assessors, with additional expertise sought for challenging cases. All scoring profiles were scrutinised by the SP as a whole. The four component elements were graded on a nine-point scale consisting of integer and half-integer scores from 0 to 4. Half-integer scores of 0.5, 1.5, 2.5 and 3.5 were allocated to elements that were judged on balance either to be on the borderline between two of the quality levels, or to incorporate aspects of both levels. The submissions provided clear evidence of the general health and vitality of the fields of research covered by Classics.

Environment templates (REF5b) consisted of four sections: (1) context and structure, research and impact strategy, (2) People, (3) Income, infrastructure and facilities, and (4) Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society. As a new element, institutional environment templates (REF5a) were submitted for context. In its assessment, the SP focussed primarily on the evidence provided through the submitting units' templates (REF5b), yet took the institutional environment template (REF5a) into account to inform judgements where there were gaps in the narrative or where cross-referral was explicitly indicated in the REF5b text. The environment data reports (REF4a and b) provided context for the relevant sections of the environment templates (primarily on PGR numbers and income) and informed, but did not determine, grades for those sections. Due attention was also paid to non-HESA income discussed in section 3 but not included in REF4b. The SP received data on the FTE, headcount and ECRs of the submitting units but endeavoured to judge each submission on its own merits. For instance, size was not seen as an unmediated index of sustainability or indeed quality per se, and PGR completion and income per FTE were considered in light of the number of ECRs among the submitting unit's staff.

Submitting units did not always find it easy to complete the template following the REF criteria, with material sometimes inserted out of place. The SP assessed the templates as a whole, taking information into account wherever it was found. However, it could only take into account what was contained in the template and, where templates were poorly written, omissions and lack of detail or clarity could not be mitigated. In particular, we sometimes struggled to find sufficient evidence in support of bold or general claims, or to understand what strategies led to successes achieved. The strongest environment templates provided clear evidence of the general health and vitality of that Classics unit and showed how their strategies actively informed their unit structure, recruitment, and research and impact activities. Some weaker statements tended to be more generic or appeared to be devising a strategy retrospectively.

(1) Context and structure, research and impact strategy

Research clusters now exist in all submitting units. They enhanced the submitting units' sustainability where they actively promoted internal and external collaboration or benefited from intersections with institutional centres and demonstrated vitality through related workshops, conferences and visiting speakers, as well as publications. Yet, occasionally, research clusters seemed like umbrella headings for contingent rather than strategically organised groupings, raising questions about sustainability even where vitality might be considerable. The SP recognised evidence of, and emphasis on, support for individual as well as collaborative research. Strong impact strategies included: training for ECRs and PGRs; reducing workloads for those engaged in substantial impact activity; and embedding impact into research activities from the outset. Some submitting units maximised benefits from their HEI's research strategies and provided compelling evidence of how the vitality and sustainability of the unit had been supported by higher level structures, or how the unit had engaged purposefully with this wider framework.

Where submitting units actively promoted interdisciplinary research, they did so in a range of different ways: locally, by making it a strategic aim and promoting it within the unit; within the HEI, through engagement in or leadership of cross-departmental/faculty research centres or themes; or through participation in national and international groupings of a multi-disciplinary nature. Concern for making research available through open access was evident in most submissions. OA requirements instated by an increasing number of funding bodies had a noticeable effect, with some projects publishing all their outputs and/or data in OA. The SP noted that institutionally there were varied levels of financial support for OA publication.

(2) People

Indicators of how the research of staff was supported included strategic recruitment, workload modelling, provision for training, research mentoring and career development at all career levels, and a research leave policy. A majority of units reported an increase in staff numbers over the REF cycle. Almost all units demonstrated how they enhanced their sustainability by supporting ECRs in particular. The SP was slightly concerned that staff entering mid-career often



appeared to lose much of the support they had enjoyed previously, and it welcomed strategies that continued to give support to staff at this career stage. Where some research support was provided centrally, the most successful submissions explained well how the benefits from these provisions were made to work at a local level. The SP noticed clear differences in the support received by units from their institutions, especially in the form of seed money for research projects and research leave. Although research leave is a crucial element in research support when teaching and administrative loads have increased, some HEIs were clearly less generous with their leave policies in terms of the length of service needed to be eligible and/or in terms of competition to obtain it.

There was much encouraging evidence of support for PGRs, especially in the provision of training on research methodology, grant capture, interaction and collaboration within and without the HEI, and career development. A majority of units reported an increase in PGR completions. Several units took action to prepare PGRs and post-doctoral Fellows for employment within and outside academia and it was encouraging to see evidence of the employability of Classics PGRs within a wide range of professional occupations.

In the best cases, attention to EDI permeated all activities including recruitment and promotion, the make-up of committees, REF submission, and diversification of the PGR community from which future Classics scholars will be recruited. Many submitting units were able to report improvements on gender equality with several reaching gender parity. Yet few units considered EDI beyond gender, by also addressing characteristics such as ethnicity, disability or class and offering a range of data on the relative diversity of its staff and PGRs. Poorer statements offered only generic comments on policies and/or failed to address how EDI concerns informed their REF submission (as was expressly requested). Where gender and other imbalances were visible, the SP appreciated the presence of upward trajectories and/or specifics on how the unit intended to address the issue in the future.

(3) Income, infrastructure and facilities

Income generation had clearly been a key objective of most submitting units, and many reported a significant increase in external income. We noted and welcomed a great diversity of income streams, plenty of imagination in thinking beyond UKRI funds and demonstration that such income was strategically and effectively sought and used. The strongest submissions provided evidence for how income generation was pursued strategically and at all career levels, supported by training, internal peer review, mentoring, pump-priming, seed-corn funding, support during the award period and so on. Insufficient articulation of policies and strategy could make success in grant capture appear contingent, raising questions over sustainability. In turn, *de facto* moderate success rates in grant capture were sometimes mitigated by carefully considered income strategies. The SP observed that large grants are now being won for a wider range of research projects than ever before.

The SP was aware that infrastructure is arguably the element of the research environment most dependent on central HEI decisions. We welcomed signs of HEI investment in Classics, sometimes quite considerable. The best infrastructure

provision included not only a research library, but also university museums and special collections, archives, digital resources or Digital Humanities centres, archaeology labs, and space and resources for research centres at a local level. The strongest submissions did not just list centrally provided infrastructure but demonstrated how submitting units worked with and benefitted from it. Where such provision was more limited, the SP recognised submitting units' initiatives to maximise benefits from similar infrastructure outside their institution.

(4) Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society.

We found collaborations with external researchers often to be one of the strongest elements in a submitting unit's research environment, with most units having extensive links both nationally and internationally, and within and outside the HEI sector. Particularly impressive was evidence of increasing engagement with areas outside Europe and North America, including in China and the Far East, South America, and the Middle East. Some units took advantage of staff connections and built on these with a real sense of strategic purpose, assisting more junior staff to enter into networks or to create their own.

Relations with non-academic users, engagement with diverse communities, and contribution to society were equally impressive in scope and scale in many submitting units. The SP noted that a firm hold on the popular imagination is a persistent strength of Classics, and it saw lots of excellent work from academics across the discipline in all types of media. Evidence for engagement with non-academic communities included excellent examples of local and regional partnerships.

The SP, however, sometimes observed a lot of activity demonstrating vitality in this sector accompanied by little unifying structure or strategy, thus raising questions about sustainability. Classics as a discipline is very well networked and has for long flourished on the back of individual and collective commitment to, and engagement with, activities supporting the health of the discipline nationally and internationally. Accordingly, we saw evidence for such commitment in all submitting units. It was encouraging to see the sustainability of the discipline boosted by the presence of more ECRs than in the past in national and international committees, although some units relied too heavily on just a few staff playing leadership roles nationally or internationally. The SP was also pleased to see that many units engaged in close partnership with organisations that are promoting Classics and diversifying its beneficiaries.

CONCLUSIONS FOR CLASSICS RESEARCH

It was a challenging time in which to undertake such a complex assessment of Classics research. As the Covid pandemic occurred towards the end of the REF cycle its effects on the submissions received were limited. Where some disruptions were evident (such as in the collection of evidence for impact case studies) appropriate allowance was made by all SPs. Student recruitment in the Arts & Humanities, however, has been falling for some time leading to some closures or the restructuring of departments. A&H research, therefore, is often being undertaken in quite difficult circumstances. Concern has been expressed that the four funding bodies should consider how to allocate to HEIs the Quality-Related funding that



might arise from research units that were successful in REF2021 but are now being reduced or removed for reasons unrelated to the quality of their research.

Research submitted to the Classics SP embraces vast sweeps of time, geography, approach, and sources analysed. Yet Classics is the smallest SP in Main Panel D. A question therefore hangs over whether a Classics-dedicated panel will be permitted in any future research assessment. This is a matter of concern, for while the Classics SP report discusses the nature of UK Classics research extensively no mention is made of it specifically in any other SP report, including those for Archaeology, History, English, Modern Languages, and Theology. Should Classics become only a sub-category of other units of assessment in future exercises and Classics departments continue to be merged into larger units, the discipline may be damaged irreparably.

However, in this REF cycle, it was gratifying to see that Classics research has clearly expanded and that medium-sized units have had the opportunity to excel. Classics research can also be found within more than twenty units submitted to other SPs by both pre- and post-1992 HEIs. This UK-based research is demonstrably vital, working in partnership with, and often leading, Classics in the rest of the world. It also engages with diverse non-academic communities locally and globally. Such growth and vitality are especially impressive given the difficult circumstances for Arts & Humanities research. The future sustainability of our discipline depends on structural and financial security and support and adequate recognition of its achievements.

Further information

For results, further data and reports, see www.ref.ac.uk