

**Performance-Based Research Fund  
Sector Reference Group review:  
Special circumstances consultation paper**

## Contents

<b>1.</b>	<b>Purpose</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2.</b>	<b>Aims and principles of the PBRF</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>3.</b>	<b>Principles of redesign</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>4.</b>	<b>Special circumstance provisions: Background</b>	<b>4</b>
4.1	Definition	4
4.2	The 2003 PBRF Quality Evaluation	5
4.3	The 2006 PBRF Quality Evaluation	6
4.4	International comparisons	8
<b>5.</b>	<b>Discussion of issues and concerns</b>	<b>9</b>
5.1	Were special circumstances taken into account in the 2006 assessment?	10
5.2	Which special circumstances should be considered valid?	11
5.3	What impact should special circumstances have on the quality score and category?	17
5.4	When should special circumstances be considered?	22
5.5	Other options	23
<b>6.</b>	<b>How to submit feedback</b>	<b>24</b>
	Table 1: Types of special circumstances claimed in EPs submitted for the 2006 PBRF assessment by panel	25
	Table 2: Quality categories by type of special circumstances claimed in the 2006 PBRF assessment	26
	Table 3: Quality categories by panel and whether any special circumstance was claimed in the 2006 PBRF assessment	27
	Key to panel abbreviations	28
	<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>29</b>
	<b>Performance-Based Research Fund: Feedback template for special circumstances consultation paper</b>	<b>31</b>

### Disclaimer:

This consultation paper has been prepared independently for the Tertiary Education Commission (TEC) by the Sector Reference Group, an external group, as part of the review of the Performance-Based Research Fund. Although the TEC is facilitating this process, the consultation paper represents the independent views and suggestions of the Sector Reference Group, and does not necessarily represent the views of the TEC.

# Performance-Based Research Fund SRG review: special circumstances consultation paper

## 1. Purpose

This paper has been prepared as part of the consultation process for the 2012 Performance-Based Research Fund (PBRF) assessment.

This paper:

- discusses the issues and concerns about the **special circumstance** provisions and their application in the PBRF Quality Evaluation
- considers some options for addressing these concerns
- invites feedback from stakeholders in the tertiary education sector on the options and recommendations of the Sector Reference Group (SRG) presented in this paper
- invites feedback from the tertiary education sector on any other matters regarding special circumstances that should be considered as part of the redesign process.

## 2. Aims and principles of the PBRF

In carrying out its role, the SRG will be guided by the aims and principles of the PBRF. The PBRF is designed to:

- increase the average quality of research
- ensure that research continues to support degree and postgraduate teaching
- ensure that funding is available for postgraduate students and new researchers
- improve the quality of information on research output
- prevent undue concentration of funding that would undermine research support for all degrees or prevent access to the system by new researchers
- underpin the existing sector strengths in tertiary education research.

The PBRF is governed by the following principles:

- *Comprehensiveness*: the PBRF should appropriately measure the quality of the full range of original investigative activity that occurs within the sector, regardless of its type, form or place of output.
- *Respect for academic traditions*: the PBRF should operate in a manner that is consistent with academic freedom and institutional autonomy.
- *Consistency*: evaluations of quality made through the PBRF should be consistent across the different subject areas and in the calibration of quality ratings against international standards of excellence.

- *Continuity*: changes to the PBRF process should only be made where they can bring demonstrable improvements that outweigh the cost of implementing them.
- *Differentiation*: the PBRF should allow stakeholders and the government to differentiate between providers and their units on the basis of their relative quality.
- *Credibility*: the methodology, format and processes employed in the PBRF must be credible to those being assessed.
- *Efficiency*: administrative and compliance costs should be kept to the minimum consistent with a robust and credible process.
- *Transparency*: decisions and decision-making processes must be explained openly, except where there is a need to preserve confidentiality and privacy.
- *Complementarity*: the PBRF should be integrated with new and existing policies, such as Charters and Profiles, and quality assurance systems for degrees and degree providers.
- *Cultural inclusiveness*: the PBRF should reflect the bicultural nature of New Zealand and the special role and status of the Treaty of Waitangi, and should appropriately reflect and include the full diversity of New Zealand's population.

### 3. Principles of redesign

PBRF redesign work ahead of the 2012 Quality Evaluation will be based on a number of principles and considerations including:

- upholding the aims and principles of the PBRF (outlined above)
- learning from the first two Quality Evaluations in order to make improvements to the design of the PBRF and the implementation of the 2012 Quality Evaluation
- drawing on relevant experience and expertise across the tertiary education sector
- exposing proposed changes to rigorous sector and expert scrutiny
- achieving as much sector agreement as possible about how the next Quality Evaluation should be conducted
- avoiding costly or time-consuming changes unless there are good reasons for believing they will bring significant improvements.

## 4. Special circumstance provisions: Background

### 4.1 Definition

Special circumstances, as defined in the *PBRF Guidelines 2006*, relate to some impairment or impediment that has affected the development of research outputs and the staff member's peer esteem (PE) or contribution to the research environment (CRE) components.

## 4.2 The 2003 PBRF Quality Evaluation

### PBRF Working Group

The PBRF Working Group, established in July 2002 to provide advice on the design and implementation of the PBRF, noted that peer review panels should take “justifiable extenuating circumstances” into account when assigning quality categories. Examples given of such circumstances were maternity or sick leave, and fewer than six years experience.<sup>1</sup>

### 2003 PBRF Guidelines

The 2003 PBRF Quality Evaluation allowed staff members to claim special circumstances for consideration with regards to the quantity of research produced during the assessment period. Specific types of circumstances were listed in the guidelines.<sup>2</sup>

Some panels also made specific notes regarding special circumstances that would be considered, such as working across some combination of clinical, teaching, administrative and research positions (Medicine and Public Health).<sup>3</sup>

### Review of the 2003 PBRF Quality Evaluation

The report on the 2003 assessment noted that there was insufficient information about special circumstances provided in Evidence Portfolios (EPs).<sup>4</sup>

The WEB Research report on the 2003 Quality Evaluation noted:

- the provisions may have advantaged administratively top-heavy TEOs
- disparity in the reporting of leadership roles in a TEO - sometimes they were reported as a special circumstance and sometimes as PE or CRE
- some staff members were productive researchers despite special circumstances and yet allowances were made for researchers with similar special circumstances who were not as productive
- some increases in quality categories may have been a result of factors other than the quality or quantity of research presented
- while the provisions were intended to justify fewer nominated research outputs (NROs), “the distinction between quality and quantity was not always an easy one for panels to make”
- the provisions may distort the results of research productivity of TEOs.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Education, *Investing in Excellence: The Report of the Performance-Based Research Fund Working Group*, December 2002, p.15.

<sup>2</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *PBRF: A Guide for 2003*, July 2003, p.79.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp.139, 146.

<sup>4</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *Evaluating Research Excellence: the 2003 assessment*, April 2004, p.34.

<sup>5</sup> WEB Research, *Phase 1 Evaluation of the implementation of the PBRF and the conduct of the 2003 Quality Evaluation*, July 2004, p.148.

The SRG established for the redesign of the 2006 PBRF Quality Evaluation sought feedback on special circumstances as part of a consultation paper on the assessment framework. The recommendation for the creation of the new and emerging researchers category was the major result of this consultation paper, but a number of other aspects of the special circumstance provisions were discussed.<sup>6</sup>

The report of the 2006 SRG noted concerns about the application of special circumstances, inadequate information in some EPs, and that approximately 75 percent of EPs submitted claimed special circumstances. The 2006 SRG made a number of recommendations to address these concerns:

- more specific information should be collected as part of the EPs
- panels should apply the special circumstances to all three components of the EP
- panels should consider the length of time over which the special circumstance applied, and the magnitude of the special circumstance and likely impact
- the Moderation Panel should pay particular attention to the application of the special circumstance provisions
- special circumstances should also be included in the holistic assessment stage
- the criteria for special circumstances should not be changed.<sup>7</sup>

### 4.3 The 2006 PBRF Quality Evaluation

The recommendations of the 2006 SRG were incorporated into the PBRF Guidelines 2006. The types of special circumstances remained largely unchanged, consideration of special circumstances was extended to all three components of the EP, and staff members were asked to include additional information on the duration of the special circumstance, the magnitude of impact, and a description of nature of the special circumstance.

The guidelines included the following criteria for claiming special circumstances:<sup>8</sup>

A staff member can claim special circumstances only where they meet one or more of the following criteria:

- Their limited numbers of research outputs are due to:
  - a long period of preparation in advance of publication of a major work (such as a book, composition, design, product or performance)
  - confidentiality requirements that restricts the publication of further outputs based on the confidential research output
  - work of a collaborative nature that is dependent on the completion of further work by other researchers, where evidence of intensive research activity during the assessment period exists and this suggests that the research is significant in scope and impact, included producing intermediate outputs.
- They have become research active for the first time during the assessment period.

<sup>6</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, 2006 Quality Evaluation: Assessment Framework Consultation Paper, November 2004, pp.17-25.

<sup>7</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, 2006 Quality Evaluation Report of the SRG, June 2005, pp.10, 18-19, 22, 66, 70.

<sup>8</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, PBRF Guidelines 2006, July 2005, p.62.

- They have been on extended leave that prevents research activity from occurring (such as sick leave, parental leave etc). Sabbatical leave that allows for continuation of research activity should not result in lowered expectations of the quantity of research output.
- They have been employed part-time for some or all of the assessment period.
- They have had significant and sustained other responsibilities during the assessment period, which has limited the quantity of research they have produced (eg. staff teaching at both degree and sub-degree level).
- They have had significant and sustained community responsibilities during the assessment period (eg. to iwi and Pacific communities).
- Other circumstances that are seen to be relevant, at the discretion of the Panel Chair.

In both the 2003 and the 2006 assessments, special circumstances were intended as a mechanism for consideration of circumstances that had resulted in a reduced quantity of research outputs and, in the 2006 assessment, in entries in the other components of the EP. Special circumstances should not impact on the assessment of the quality of the research activity.

In the 2006 assessment, 40 percent of staff members who submitted an EP did not claim any special circumstances, 37 percent claimed one special circumstance, 15 percent claimed two and eight percent claimed three (staff members cannot claim more than three special circumstances). Some staff members also claimed multiple special circumstances of the same type (for example, 27 staff members noted more than one extended leave).

New and emerging researchers were over-represented in special circumstances, comprising 32 percent of all EPs with special circumstances but only 25 percent of all EPs submitted. They were also more concentrated in particular special circumstance types: 64 percent of all EPs claiming they were research active for the first time, 35 percent of those claiming limited research outputs and 31 percent of part-time staff were new and emerging researchers (see Table 2, page 26).

The report of the moderation panel in the 2006 Quality Evaluation recommended that the TEC consider making changes to the special circumstances provisions and noted the following points in discussion of the recommendation:

- The proportion of EPs claiming special circumstances in the 2006 Quality Evaluation decreased significantly to 59 percent of those submitted.
- The Moderation Panel was provided with summary information that allowed identification of trends and the way in which special circumstances were applied across all panels.
- While special circumstances often influenced the numerical scores assigned to an EP, the quality category was unlikely to be affected unless some other significant factor was taken into account during the holistic assessment.
- A further recommendation that special circumstances should only be taken into account at the holistic assessment phase (to simplify the process, take special circumstances into account when they are most likely to have an impact and prevent double-counting of special circumstances).<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *Evaluating Research Excellence: The 2006 Assessment*, p.287.

## 4.4 International comparisons

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in the United Kingdom provides for circumstances that have had a significant and adverse impact on individual staff members' research activity to be taken in account.

As part of the review of the 2001 RAE, a report was prepared on equal opportunities implications of the RAE and the proposed changes. This report included discussion of individual staff circumstances and noted that these were treated differently by some panels (particularly regarding career breaks and new staff), and there was a lack of certainty at an institutional level about the way that the individual circumstances provisions would be applied. The report recommended that more guidance should be given to panels, particularly regarding family and domestic matters, health issues, and heavy clinical or contractual roles.<sup>10</sup>

The provisions for individual staff circumstances were updated for the 2008 RAE, in part due to changes in equalities legislation in the United Kingdom.

The Panel Criteria and Working Methods Generic Statement lists a number of criteria which should be considered in relation to the quantity of research outputs:

- maternity, paternity, parental or adoption leave and arrangements to return to work following this leave<sup>11</sup>
- part-time and flexible work
- time spent as a carer or other domestic commitments
- permanent disabilities and any temporary disabilities of 12 months or more
- absence from work on the advice of a registered medical practitioner
- long term projects of significant scale and scope
- early career researchers
- absences of six months or more (such as non-academic secondments) outside of the higher education sector and career breaks unconnected with research, teaching or other academic duties
- absences which the institution is legally obliged to permit (for example, for religious observances or as representatives of the workforce)
- other personal circumstances that have had a significant impact on the quality of research outputs.

Academic and academic-related duties, such as teaching and administration, are specifically excluded from the list of circumstances that panels should consider in relation to the quantity of research outputs.

The responsibility lies with individual institutions to ensure that information supplied about individual circumstances is accurate.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Equality Challenge Unit, *Equality Proofing of Research Assessment Main Report*, October 2003, p.14, online, available at: <http://www.rae.ac.uk/pubs/other/equproof/equproof.pdf> (26 June 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Health and safety restrictions for pregnant and nursing women should also be taken into account in relevant subjects where the staff member may have been prevented from undertaking laboratory-based research. *RAE 2008 Updated equality briefing for panel chairs, members, advisors and secretaries*, May 2007, p.8.

<sup>12</sup> *RAE 2008 Panel Criteria and Working Methods Generic Statement*, paragraphs 38-51.

## 5. Discussion of issues and concerns

The special circumstances provisions need to mediate between two important but often competing factors:

- (1) There are a range of circumstances that impact negatively on a staff member's ability to engage in research activity and produce research outputs. To ignore these circumstances in assigning quality categories would be unfair and contrary to the government's and TEOs' equity obligations and responsibilities, and to the PBRF principles of cultural inclusiveness and credibility.
- (2) The PBRF allocates funds to institutions on the basis of research quality and productivity, and therefore research activity needs to be measured appropriately to ensure the fair distribution of funding.

Special circumstances are, by their very nature, particular to the individual staff member and their impact on research productivity will vary. This variation may be more pronounced between subject areas as the demands of particular disciplines may lead to specific special circumstances inhibiting research activity to a greater or lesser extent.

The high number of staff claiming special circumstances suggests that in many cases there is little that is 'special' about the circumstances and they may be part of the normal expectation of an academic staff member's activity (or an academic staff member in that discipline). This is particularly the case with staff who are research active for the first time, have significant and sustained other responsibilities or a limited number of research outputs. A significant proportion of staff claimed these special circumstances (see Table 1, page 25) .

There are also some differences in the proportion and types of special circumstances between panels (see Table 1). Approximately, two-thirds of EPs in Health, Medicine and Public Health, and Education claimed special circumstances, with a high proportion in each of these panels claiming significant and sustained other responsibilities. A high proportion of Education EPs also claimed the special circumstance limited research outputs and a high proportion of Medicine and Public Health EPs were part-time staff. A very small percentage of staff claimed significant and sustained community responsibilities in all panels except Māori Knowledge and Development.

These differences suggest that some types of 'special' circumstances may be more usual in some disciplines than in others.

Staff members were asked to provide information on the duration of the special circumstances in the 2006 assessment, but there is no guidance on how the duration should be factored into the evaluation process. What constitutes a sufficient period of time to warrant a change in the quality score (and how much this change should be), is problematic and very dependent on the individual staff member and type of special circumstance.

A certain level of discretion for panels is therefore necessary in the treatment of special circumstances. A highly prescribed process of dealing with the provisions might conversely result in unfair outcomes to those who did and did not claim special circumstances in their EPs.

However, commentary after both the 2003 and 2006 assessments suggests that there is a lack of transparency and a perception that there is a lack of consistency - particularly between panels - in the treatment of special circumstances. This needs to be addressed to ensure the continued credibility of the PBRF.

For example, in its response to the *2006 Quality Evaluation Consultation Paper*, the Association of Staff in Tertiary Education noted:

ASTE is extremely concerned about the apparent variation in the way special circumstances were applied.... There is conflicting evidence about panel use of special circumstances when allocating score. Some panel members have publicly stated that they did not allow for any special circumstances in their own analysis.... We believe there may well have been differences between panels.... This is unacceptable and causes inequities and in fact discrimination across the sector.<sup>13</sup>

The AUS policy paper on the PBRF noted the uneven application of special circumstances and a concern that this had impacted more heavily on women.<sup>14</sup>

There have been a number of issues and concerns raised about special circumstances in the aftermath of the 2003 and 2006 assessments including:

- the perception that special circumstances were not taken into account in determining the final quality category
- the need for clarification in the guidelines about what special circumstances should be considered valid; how different types of special circumstances are expected to affect the score; how special circumstances should be applied to the PE and CRE components; and the distinction between new and emerging researchers and the special circumstance 'research active for the first time'
- ensuring the consistency of application of special circumstance between panels
- the timing of when special circumstance is considered.<sup>15</sup>

The first three issues and concerns noted above are interrelated and are all driven by the need for clarification about what special circumstances should be considered valid and what impact this should have on the staff member's quality score and category. First, however, it is necessary to consider whether special circumstances were taken into account in the 2006 assessment.

## 5.1 Were special circumstances taken into account in the 2006 assessment?

Information about the impact of special circumstances on the scoring of EPs is not available due to data quality issues. However, information is available about which special circumstances were claimed and what quality category staff members were awarded. It seems reasonable to assume that, if special circumstances were taken into account, the quality category profile of staff members who did and did not claim special circumstances would be similar.

<sup>13</sup> Online, available at: <http://www.aste.ac.nz/all/pressreleases/PBRF%2006%20Consultation%20Feedback%20as%20Sent.pdf> (26 June 2008).

<sup>14</sup> AUS, 'Performance Based Research Fund Policy Paper for AUS Conference November 2007', p.3, online, available at: [http://www.aus.ac.nz/Policy/PBRF/PBRF%20-%20future%20options\(2007\).pdf](http://www.aus.ac.nz/Policy/PBRF/PBRF%20-%20future%20options(2007).pdf) (26 June 2008). See also comments by the AUS in Rebecca Matthews, 'Exercises in Assessment: What the NZ and United Kingdom versions teach us...', *Advocate*, 12, 1, 2005, p.30.

<sup>15</sup> This summary of issues and concerns is compiled from documents discussed in this paper, such as the reports of the SRG and Moderation Panel, other commentaries after the 2003 and 2006 assessments (for example, the Royal Society of New Zealand PBRF Forum in May 2004), and anecdotal comments.

If the comparison is made purely on whether a staff member claimed any special circumstances or not (see Table 2, page 26), there is clearly a disparity in the allocation of quality categories. However, it must be remembered that new and emerging researchers are over-represented in EPs claiming special circumstances and it is unlikely that these staff members would be assigned the higher quality categories.

Examination of individual special circumstance categories provides a better basis for comparison. Categories in which new and emerging researchers are not over-represented (significant and sustained other responsibilities/community responsibilities, extended leave and other circumstances) all have similar quality category profiles as all staff who submitted an EP.

This suggests that special circumstances were appropriately taken into account in the assigning of quality categories.

## **5.2 Which special circumstances should be considered valid?**

While staff members may claim special circumstances, it does not necessarily follow that this will (or should) have an impact on an EP's score or quality category. However, the process through which it is decided whether a special circumstance is valid needs to be fair, transparent and equitable.

It is proposed that each type of special circumstance should be considered based on the following questions (some of these questions will have more relevance to some types of special circumstances than others):

- Does the special circumstance have the potential to impact negatively on research activity?
- Is the special circumstance related to the normal expectation of an academic staff member's activity?
- Has the special circumstance already been compensated for by the TEO (eg. sabbatical leave, reduced teaching/administrative load)?
- Is it reasonable to expect the TEO/staff member to mitigate the impact of the special circumstance on the staff member's ability to undertake research?
- Has the special circumstance already been taken into account in another part of the portfolio? (eg. new and emerging, PE and/or CRE, explanatory notes in NROs) (ie. to avoid double counting)
- What is the impact to the TEO/individual if the special circumstances are not taken into account?
- How are special circumstances taken into account in comparative international research quality assessment mechanisms (the United Kingdom's RAE provides the best comparison)?

### **5.2.1 Limited number of research outputs**

The guidelines note the importance of a platform of research and that an EP should show evidence of breadth and/or depth of research activity. This special circumstance allows staff members to explain why this research platform is not immediately apparent in the quantity of outputs.

However, the guidelines also note other factors that will be taken into account in assessing the research platform, such as research outputs that have had a major impact on the discipline and the type of research output.<sup>16</sup>

Information on the nature and significance of NROs, such as confidentiality restrictions, is included in the research output component of the EP in 'other comments'. Inclusion of this special circumstance risks double-counting. Staff members should ensure that they adequately explain the significance or confidentiality of the research output in the comments field.

One of the options under this special circumstance is that the researcher is part of a collaborative team and work must be completed by other researchers before research outputs can be produced. This is more likely to impact on new and emerging researchers and would be considered normal practice in many disciplines. This special circumstance, when based on collaborative research, should not therefore impact on the staff members score unless they can demonstrate that the collaborative work is not the normal expectation of new researchers in the discipline.

Long term projects are an important aspect of a researcher's activities, particularly in some disciplines such as the medical professions. The findings of such projects can be significant and the PBRF should not act as a disincentive for staff members to undertake long term projects. 'Long term' may vary between disciplines and panels should therefore have discretion in determining whether the quality score or category should be affected, but a baseline minimum of five years is suggested. It should be noted that only the research output component of the quality score should be affected, and should only be used when the project has not been completed (or there has not been sufficient time for publication between completion and the end of the assessment period).

However, 'Limited number of research outputs' is not a special circumstance and information of this kind should be included in the comments section of the research output component of the EP.

Negative impact	Only on quantity of research outputs
Normal expectation	Possibly in some disciplines and for new and emerging researchers who are more likely to work in collaborative teams, particularly in the sciences
Compensation/mitigation	None
Double counting	Could be included in comments in research output component
Impact not to take into account	No impact if noted in research output component
International comparisons	United Kingdom RAE - long term projects valid circumstance

### 5.2.2 Research active for the first time

Most researchers in these circumstances will qualify for consideration as new and emerging researchers. The criteria for new and emerging researchers is that the staff member was first appointed to a PBRF-eligible position or they were required to undertake research or degree-level teaching as a condition of employment for the first time within the assessment period.<sup>17</sup> In the 2006 PBRF, 629 staff members (64 percent) claiming this special circumstance were awarded a new and emerging research quality category.

<sup>16</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *PBRF Guidelines 2006*, pp.160-61.

<sup>17</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *PBRF Guidelines 2006*, p.35.

In the 2003 and 2006 assessment, college of education mergers with universities may have been a reason why staff members were research active for the first time, but this will not be a factor in the 2012 assessment. The Education panel had the highest number (85) and percentage (8 percent) of staff claiming this special circumstance (27 of these staff members were awarded new and emerging research quality categories).

Staff members who are research active for the first time are provided for in the new and emerging researchers provisions. Therefore, this option for special circumstances should not have an impact on the quality score and category and should be removed.

Negative impact	Usually
Normal expectation	N/A
Compensation/mitigation	N/A
Double counting	New and emerging research provisions
Impact not to take into account	No impact if taken into account in other parts of EP
International comparisons	United Kingdom RAE - early career researcher valid circumstance - but RAE does not have new and emerging provisions

### 5.2.3 Extended leave

Maternity/parental leave, sick leave and other leave that results in a significant break in a staff member's career will impact negatively on all components of an EP.

The impact of extended leave on the various components of the EP may be greater or lesser in different disciplines and some level of panel discretion is necessary. It is to be expected that there will be variation in the effect of this category on the scoring of EPs between panels. (There is quite considerable variation between panels, but the number of staff claiming the extended leave special circumstance in each panel is very small, ranging from three in Māori Knowledge and Development to 33 in Biological Sciences - see Table 3, page 27.)

It should be noted that sabbatical leave is specifically excluded from the extended leave special circumstance as this enhances a staff member's ability to engage in research activity and produce research outputs.

Staff members claiming this special circumstance should indicate how the extended leave has impacted negatively on their ability to engage in research activity.

Negative impact	Shorter time period in which to undertake research
Normal expectation	No
Compensation/mitigation	Not usually
Double counting	Is not taken into account in any other part of EP
Impact not to take into account	Could contravene equity responsibilities
International comparisons	United Kingdom RAE - family and domestic circumstances valid

#### 5.2.4 Part-time staff

It could be argued staff who are employed part-time make less of a contribution to the teaching and research environment in their institution and therefore a lower quality category and consequently lower funding is appropriate. However, funding is allocated on an FTE basis and the institution is already 'penalised' for part-time staff.

It is difficult to evaluate the impact of part-time employment on the ability of a staff member to engage in research. A staff member who is a fractional appointment because they are also employed in the industry (for example, by a DHB) will clearly have considerably less time to undertake research. However, a semi-retired staff member may be a more productive researcher because of his or her part-time status.

In general, however, a part-time staff member is more likely to have fewer research outputs, and fewer entries in the other two components of the EP. However, staff members still need to be able to demonstrate a platform of research and this is difficult to evaluate if there are only a small number of research outputs in the portfolio.

Staff members claiming this special circumstance should indicate how their part-time employment has impacted negatively on their ability to engage in research activity.

Negative impact	Less time in which to undertake research
Normal expectation	No, most PBRF-eligible staff are full-time
Compensation/mitigation	Not usually, but in some circumstances the staff member may have more time to undertake research
Double counting	No, but may be double penalising not to take into account as TEOs are only funded for the FTE for which the staff member is employed
Impact not to take into account	Could contravene equity responsibilities
International comparisons	United Kingdom RAE part-time and flexible work valid circumstance

#### 5.2.5 Significant and sustained other responsibilities

This special circumstance type encompasses a number of different areas, which need to be discussed separately.

First, staff members may hold leadership positions in their TEO, such as Head of Department. Staff appointed to these roles are usually senior staff with an established research record and reputation (for example, Heads of Departments are often Professors). These positions come with substantial administrative workloads and can have a major impact on the staff member's ability to produce research outputs. However, staff in leadership positions are also expected to maintain an appropriate level of research and may be provided with additional research support by their TEO

and extended sabbatical leave on completion of their term. The PE and CRE components of the EP are enhanced by such leadership roles, particularly if the indirect benefits are taken into account.

Some staff members also have other roles within their discipline such as journal editorships or responsibilities within their professional association. However, such positions are usually a normal expectation of an academic staff member's activity (particularly for senior staff) and enhance the staff member's research activity rather than detract from it. These positions should be included in the PE and CRE components of the EP. As these positions enhance a staff members EP, they should not also increase the quality score through special circumstances.

A significant number of staff in some disciplines, such as medicine, business or research organisations, are employed part-time by their TEO and are also employed in the industry in which they are teaching. This direct connection between industry and the lecture theatre is an important aspect of teaching. However, these staff will be on fractional appointments and should claim special circumstances under the part-time employment category not the significant and sustained other responsibilities.

Teaching at sub-degree level is the example given in the PBRF guidelines of this special circumstance type. The substantiveness test will make some staff with a marginal role in degree level teaching ineligible, but there will still be staff members, particularly outside of the university sector, who meet the minimum requirement for eligibility even though degree-level teaching is a small part of their role. This should be addressed through the eligibility requirements rather than the special circumstances provisions.

A heavy teaching load is the other circumstance that is often claimed. In theory, TEOs should ensure that their staff have adequate time in which to undertake research. While this may not always be the case (for example, due to staff on leave and difficulties in recruiting staff) it is the TEOs responsibility to ensure that staff members have sufficient time in which to engage in research activity.

It is worth noting that staff members at all academic grades are expected to undertake administrative responsibilities. To allow some of these to be claimed as special circumstances may be unfair to those staff members who have administrative and other responsibilities but are not able to claim these under the special circumstances provisions.

Negative impact	Usually
Normal expectation	Usually
Compensation/mitigation	Extended sabbatical leave, reduced other responsibilities
Double counting	PE and CRE components (directly and indirectly)
Impact not to take into account	Could discourage staff members from undertaking administrative positions and other responsibilities
International comparisons	Not valid in United Kingdom RAE

### 5.2.6 Significant and sustained community responsibilities

The examples given in the PBRF guidelines of this type of special circumstance are responsibilities to iwi and Pacific communities. Very few staff members claimed this special circumstance (2 percent) and the proportion was relatively low even in the Māori Knowledge and Development panel (12 percent).

Consultation papers focused on Māori and Pacific researchers will be prepared by the SRG. The additional community expectations and responsibilities placed on researchers in these areas will be discussed more fully in these papers, but the preliminary view is that failure to take this special circumstance into account may be inequitable to Māori and Pacific staff.

Negative impact	Usually
Normal expectation	Can be for Māori and Pacific researchers
Compensation/mitigation	Not usually
Double counting	Possibly in PE and CRE components Specific provisions for Māori and Pacific researchers
Impact not to take into account	Could be inequitable to staff engaged in Māori or Pacific research
International comparisons	United Kingdom RAE religious observances, representative of the workforce valid circumstances

### 5.2.7 Other

'Other circumstances' noted in the 2006 assessment included:

- high workload
- recent immigration or relocation (within New Zealand or to/from overseas)
- personal (for example, maternity leave, caring for dependents)
- change in employment circumstances (new job, break in employment, change in position, move to/from research orientated position)
- PhD recently completed/in progress or otherwise involved in study
- personal health
- reduction in postgraduate students being available
- confidentiality, secrecy or intellectual property issues.

A small number of circumstances not included in this list were noted, such as a unique area of research or the research subject is not easily accessible.

Some of these circumstances would have been more appropriately categorised in specified special circumstance types. Clear guidelines about what is included in each category may assist staff in selecting which type of circumstance applies (staff may also need to be advised that they are not limited to one of each special circumstance type).

A one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate for this category and each case should be considered on the basis of the questions listed at the beginning of the section and with reference to relevant sections in other types of special circumstances.

### 5.2.8 Summary

The preliminary view of the SRG about which special circumstances staff members should be able to claim is:

Special circumstance	Should staff be able to claim this special circumstance?
Limited research outputs	No
Research active for the first time	No
Extended leave (parental leave, long-term illness)	Yes
Part-time employment	Yes
Significant and sustained other responsibilities:	
• Leadership position	No
• Discipline responsibility (for example, to a professional association)	No
• Responsibilities to another employer	No
• Sub-degree teaching	No
Significant community responsibilities	Yes
Other circumstances	Should be considered on a case-by-case basis

The special circumstance provisions should only be used in the assessment of the breadth and depth of the research platform and the number of entries in the other components of the EP - they should not be used to inform judgements of quality.

### 5.3 What impact should special circumstances have on the quality score and category?

This was perhaps the most difficult aspect of special circumstances and the area where there is a greater chance of disparity between panels. The PBRF guidelines do not contain any information except to note that special circumstances should be considered in relation to quantity but not quality. Comments from panel members suggest that more guidance about what impact special circumstances should have on the score is warranted. There also needs to be more transparency for staff members to understand how their special circumstances will be taken into account.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that special circumstances often increased the quality score in the 2006 assessment, but were considerably less likely to increase the quality category unless the staff member was on the cusp of a higher category and/or the special circumstance was significant and sustained.

There are several options for providing greater guidance to panel members about how special circumstances should impact on the evaluation of an EP:

- a formula driven approach that recalculates the score based on the time available to research, gives differential weighting to the three components of the EP or adds 'bonus' points for special circumstances
- extending the assessment period for which research outputs (but not NROs) and, in some circumstances, PE and CRE entries, can be included in the EP (or asking the staff member to provide a statement summarising this information)
- providing better guidelines on the application of the provisions through either lists of special circumstances that will and will not impact on the quality score; or more general guidelines about when and how special circumstances should impact on quality scores and categories.

### 5.3.1 Option 1: Recalculation based on a predetermined formula

EPs would be scored using the standard raw score scale and weighting process for each component. The score would then be recalculated based on the proportion of time for which the researcher was active. For example, a staff member who had been on extended leave for three years or a staff member who was appointed at 0.5 FTE for the full assessment period would have their score doubled.

Other examples:

	Staff member on extended leave for two years	Part-time staff member (0.2 FTE)
Raw score	270	100
Raw category	C	R
% of assessment period	67%	20%
Revised score	405	500
Revised category	B	B

Alternatively, the score could be recalculated by either giving greater weight to particular components of the EP (as with new and emerging where effectively the research output section is given 100 percent weighting) or allocating predetermined additional points for various special circumstances and lengths of time (for example, a staff member who was on extended leave for one year might have an additional 20 points added to their quality score).

In any of these scenarios, consideration of these EPs during the holistic assessment would be needed to ensure that the final result was appropriate, particularly for staff members with a small proportion of time when they were considered research active.

For part-time staff and staff on extended leave the proportion of the assessment period is easily ascertained but this is more difficult for other types of special circumstances. Similarly, determining the weighting for each category (and sub-category) of special circumstance and how many points should be allocated for each special circumstance would be a complex task.

The SRG does not consider this to be a good solution as it does not provide for adequate consideration of the quality of outputs.

### **5.3.2 Option 2: Allowing consideration of entries from before the assessment period**

The PBRF aims to measure research quality and, it could be argued, only evidence of engagement in research should be included in the assessment. But there are many valid reasons why a staff member may not have produced enough research outputs (and, in some cases, PE and CRE entries) within the assessment period. Special circumstances should only compensate for the amount of evidence of research activity. Where special circumstances were considered to be valid and sufficiently sustained, evaluation of the EP could also consider entries from the previous assessment period (or a summary of this information). This would ensure that the same quality standard is required of the researcher, but the staff member is not penalised because of extenuating circumstances.

The SRG does not consider this to be a good solution as it could increase the number of staff claiming special circumstances, compromise the fairness of comparisons and may lead to game-playing.

### **5.3.3 Option 3: Providing a list of special circumstances that should impact on the quality score**

Under this option, special circumstances would be categorised into three types:

- (1) those that are clearly valid and should be considered in the assessment
- (2) those which will not be considered unless a strong case is made
- (3) those which will not be considered under any circumstances.

The discussion in 5.2 of this paper, particularly the table in 5.2.8, provides an initial basis for categorisation.

### **5.3.4 Option 4: General guidelines on the application of the provisions**

Each of the options discussed above treat all special circumstances as homogenous, when they are in fact particular to the staff member, and a number of other considerations such as area of research, the sub-sector or the TEO may be important in determining the significance of the special circumstance.

Provision of better guidelines to panel and staff members about which special circumstances should be included in EPs and how they should impact on the score, but maintaining panel discretion might be the best way of dealing with special circumstances to ensure fair outcomes.

This would start with a clearer definition and a statement about who should and should not include special circumstances in their EP:

- Special circumstances relate to a significant and sustained impairment or impediment outside of the normal expectations of an academic staff member's activity that has had a major effect on the quantity of research outputs and the staff member's PE or CRE components.
- Specific guidelines to panels and staff members preparing EPs could include:
- Special circumstances should not usually be claimed where the special circumstance is part of the normal expectation of the position to which the staff member is appointed.

Special circumstances should be of at least 12 months duration, and:

- 1-2 years duration will not normally increase the quality category unless the quality score is on the cusp of a higher quality category
- 2-4 years duration will not normally increase the quality category for quality scores below the mid-point of the quality category
- 5-6 years duration will not normally increase the quality category for quality scores in the lower ranges of the quality category.

New and emerging researchers should not claim the special circumstance research active for the first time. Other special circumstances will not usually increase the quality category as there are other provisions for new and emerging researchers.

Special circumstances will not usually increase the quality category where they are also included in other parts of the portfolio, such as the comments for NROs, the PE or CRE sections.

Special circumstances will not usually increase the quality category by more than one grade. Exceptions may be for quality scores that are on the cusp of a higher quality category and/or the special circumstance has had an exceptional impact.

Special circumstances should be verified by the TEO.

### 5.3.5 Summary of options for what impact special circumstances should have on the quality score and category

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages
1: Recalculate score based on a predetermined formula	Transparency about how special circumstances will affect the quality score	<p>May lead to some inappropriate quality categories (review at holistic stage may identify and correct)</p> <p>Less flexibility in panels to consider discipline-specific special circumstances</p> <p>May lead to game-playing by individuals/TEOs</p>
2: Allow for consideration of research activity before assessment period	Maintains research activity as the basis for assessment	<p>Could increase the number of staff members claiming special circumstances</p> <p>Could compromise fairness of comparisons as pre-assessment period information could effect the scoring of the EP even if the special circumstances were not considered valid (EPs could be assessed beforehand and additional information removed if appropriate, but this could add additional complexity and delay into the process)</p> <p>May lead to game-playing by individuals/TEOs</p>
3: Categorising special circumstances	<p>More consistent application of the provisions</p> <p>Clarification and transparency about which circumstances will be considered valid</p> <p>Reduces the possibility of double-counting some special circumstances</p>	<p>Less flexibility in panels to consider discipline-specific special circumstances</p> <p>Equity considerations could be compromised in a one-size-fits-all approach</p>
4: More direction in guidelines	Provides more clarity to panel members and staff submitting EPs as to how special circumstances should be treated	There may still be inconsistent application of the provisions between panels

## 5.4 When should special circumstances be considered?

EPs were assigned scores at various stages during the 2006 Quality Evaluation.

- At the first stage, each panel member assigned a preparatory score to the three components of each EP allocated to them. Where special circumstances were claimed, panel members prepared two sets of component scores, one which took into account any special circumstances and one which did not. If cross-referral was required, the cross-panel member also assigned two sets of component scores.
- Preliminary scores were then determined by the two panel members assigned to each EP. These preliminary scores included consideration of special circumstances.
- An indicative quality category was then calculated by the TEC.
- Calibrated panel scores were agreed at full panel meetings and a calibrated quality category calculated by the TEC based on these scores.
- Panels met to determine holistic quality categories, taking into account a range of factors including special circumstances.
- Information relating to the final quality categories assigned to EPs as part of the 2003 Quality Evaluation was made available to the panels and a final quality category was then assigned.<sup>18</sup>

The 2006 Moderation Panel and three of the 2006 subject panels recommended that special circumstances be considered during the panel review holistic assessment and not before.<sup>19</sup> The process for this would be:

- special circumstances recorded in the EP by the staff member
- special circumstances for all panels assessed and EPs with valid circumstances flagged for consideration as part of the determination of holistic quality categories
- EPs sent to panels for assessment with no special circumstances information included
- EPs flagged as having valid special circumstances are considered at the panel meeting to determine holistic quality categories
- individual panels would determine how special circumstances impacted on the quality category assigned
- moderation of impact of special circumstances on quality categories.

<sup>18</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *PBRF Guidelines 2006*, pp.143-47.

<sup>19</sup> The Tertiary Education Commission, *Evaluating Research Excellence: The 2006 Assessment*, p.287; The Tertiary Education Commission, *PBRF 2012 Quality Evaluation Consultation Paper 1*, Wellington, 2008, pp.24-25.

## Advantages and disadvantages of consideration of special circumstances only during holistic assessment

Advantages	Disadvantages
Simplification of process for subject panels	Additional workload and costs for the initial assessment of valid circumstances (partially offset by simplification of panel process)
More consistent application of the provisions	There may still be perceptions of inconsistent application of the provisions as individual panels determine the impact on the quality category assigned (moderation panel and publication of panel report after the Quality Evaluation might offset this)
Reduces the possibility of double-counting of special circumstances	
More attention can be placed on EPs which are close to the cut-off point between quality categories	

## 5.5 Other options

There are a number of possible changes that could be made to the provisions for special circumstances and the guidance on these provisions in the PBRF guidelines, and these are discussed above. However, removing the provisions entirely or maintaining the current provisions also need to be considered.

### 5.5.1 Removal of special circumstances provisions

EPs would not contain any special circumstances and scores and grades would be assigned without consideration of extenuating circumstances that may have impacted on individual's ability to participate in research activity. Where circumstances could be included in other parts of the portfolio, such as the ability to add comments regarding the significance and nature of NROs, these would be taken into account in the scoring of EPs.

While removal of the provisions would reduce the complexity of the submission and panel assessment process and remove the perception of inequity in the application of the provisions, there are considerable arguments against removal:

- there are valid extenuating circumstances which impact on individual staff members' research activity and failure to take these circumstances into account in the evaluation process would be unfair to the staff member

- the TEC and individual TEOs have equity responsibilities that would be compromised by the removal of these provisions
- it would not meet the PBRF principle of cultural inclusiveness.

### 5.5.2 Maintaining the current provisions and guidelines

The PBRF principles and the SRG's principles for redesign both require that a high threshold be met for making changes, stating that there must be good reasons for any changes and the benefits must outweigh any costs of implementing them.

While keeping the current provisions and guidelines would provide continuity, there are several important arguments for change:

- the perception of inconsistent application of the provisions and uncertainty about what circumstances are considered valid need to be clarified to fulfil the PBRF principles of consistency, credibility and transparency
- changes can be made that will have significant benefits and will not incur major implementation costs for the TEC, the subject panels or TEOs.

## 6. How to submit feedback

This paper has been considered by the SRG and approved for consultation purposes.

The SRG would like to receive feedback from the stakeholders in the tertiary education sector in relation to this PBRF special circumstances consultation paper.

Feedback is sought in relation to:

- the general issues and concerns raised in this paper
- the options and recommendations identified in this paper
- any additional recommendations that stakeholders would like the SRG to consider with relation to the special circumstance provisions.

Please use the Feedback Template on page 31 to submit your feedback. This contains some questions indicating areas that the SRG would be particularly interested in receiving feedback about, but responses to any of the material in this paper would be welcome.

During the redesign process a number of consultation papers will be prepared examining specific design issues and outlining possible options. Feedback from the sector will be invited on each of these papers.

Table 1: Types of special circumstances claimed in EPs submitted for the 2006 PBRF assessment by panel

Primary panel	Extended leave		Limited research outputs		Part-time		New researcher		Community responsibilities		Other responsibilities		Other		All EPs		
	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	No.	% of EPs in panel	Total claiming S.C.	% claiming S.C.	Total No.
BIO	33	8%	59	14%	37	9%	99	23%	3	1%	56	13%	59	14%	260	60%	434
BEC	29	5%	78	13%	28	5%	136	23%	10	2%	109	19%	96	16%	358	61%	585
CPA	18	5%	35	10%	34	10%	72	20%	3	1%	60	17%	28	8%	179	51%	353
EDU	14	3%	85	20%	32	8%	88	21%	9	2%	112	27%	53	13%	271	65%	419
ETA	9	3%	37	12%	18	6%	65	21%	7	2%	65	21%	50	16%	184	60%	307
HEAL	20	6%	53	15%	42	12%	81	23%	13	4%	87	25%	49	14%	238	68%	348
HUM	32	6%	67	13%	26	5%	103	20%	6	1%	96	19%	65	13%	298	58%	512
MKD	3	3%	13	15%	9	10%	13	15%	11	12%	19	21%	12	13%	51	57%	89
MATH	16	5%	40	12%	19	6%	63	18%	3	1%	57	17%	35	10%	181	53%	342
MED	26	6%	50	12%	92	21%	100	23%	15	3%	106	24%	44	10%	285	66%	434
PHYS	5	2%	18	8%	15	6%	54	23%		0%	23	10%	28	12%	119	50%	240
SCO	25	5%	56	12%	42	9%	94	20%	11	2%	81	17%	73	16%	275	59%	469
Total	230	5%	591	13%	394	9%	968	21%	91	2%	871	19%	592	13%	2699	60%	4532

Table 2: Quality categories by type of special circumstance claimed in the 2006 PBRF assessment

	Quality category								Total
	A	B	C	C(NE)	R	R(NE)	AII NE		
<b>1. All staff who submitted an EP</b>									
No.	218	1342	1299	826	520	327	1153	4532	
%	5%	30%	29%	18%	11%	7%	25%	100%	
<b>2. Staff who did not claim any special circumstances</b>									
No.	120	730	518	222	178	65	287	1833	
%	7%	40%	28%	12%	10%	4%	16%	100%	
<b>3. Staff who claimed at least one special circumstance</b>									
No.	98	612	781	605	342	262	867	2699	
%	4%	23%	29%	22%	13%	10%	32%	100%	
<b>4. Staff who claimed special circumstances (staff may claim up to three)</b>									
Limited research outputs	No.	11	85	185	124	106	80	204	591
	%	2%	14%	31%	21%	18%	14%	35%	100%
Part-time	No.	8	76	139	81	49	41	122	394
	%	2%	19%	35%	21%	12%	10%	31%	100%
Community responsibilities	No.	2	25	24	11	21	8	19	91
	%	2%	27%	26%	12%	23%	9%	21%	100%
Other responsibilities	No.	53	271	276	76	139	56	132	871
	%	6%	31%	32%	9%	16%	6%	15%	100%
Extended leave	No.	7	64	75	46	26	12	58	230
	%	3%	28%	33%	20%	11%	5%	25%	100%
New researcher	No.	2	91	168	442	84	181	623	968
	%	0%	9%	17%	46%	9%	19%	64%	100%
Other	No.	34	171	187	89	80	31	120	592
	%	6%	29%	32%	15%	14%	5%	20%	100%

Table 3: Quality categories by panel and whether any special circumstance was claimed in the 2006 PBRF assessment

Primary panel	Special circumstances claimed	Quality category											
		A		B		C		R		All			
		No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%		
BIO	N	12	8%	85	55%	53	34%	4	3%	154	3%		
	Y	8	5%	60	36%	82	50%	15	9%	165	9%		
BEC	N	11	6%	92	48%	59	31%	28	15%	190	15%		
	Y	13	5%	76	31%	110	44%	49	20%	248	20%		
CPA	N	4	3%	46	36%	51	40%	26	20%	127	20%		
	Y	3	3%	25	23%	45	42%	34	32%	107	32%		
EDU	N	4	3%	35	27%	52	40%	40	31%	131	31%		
	Y	2	1%	34	19%	75	41%	70	39%	181	39%		
ETA	N	12	11%	55	50%	38	35%	4	4%	109	4%		
	Y	11	8%	53	40%	61	46%	9	7%	134	7%		
HEAL	N	9	10%	28	30%	39	41%	18	19%	94	19%		
	Y	6	3%	40	23%	73	42%	56	32%	175	32%		
HUM	N	19	11%	90	51%	53	30%	16	9%	178	9%		
	Y	16	8%	88	44%	60	30%	37	18%	201	18%		
MKD	N		0%	7	28%	9	36%	9	36%	25	36%		
	Y	1	3%	9	26%	13	38%	11	32%	34	32%		
MATH	N	12	8%	69	49%	43	30%	18	13%	142	13%		
	Y	2	2%	36	31%	68	58%	11	9%	117	9%		
MED	N	14	11%	69	52%	46	35%	3	2%	132	2%		
	Y	14	7%	95	44%	94	44%	12	6%	215	6%		
PHYS	N	10	10%	67	68%	20	20%	2	2%	99	2%		
	Y	6	8%	28	37%	31	41%	11	14%	76	14%		
SCO	N	13	8%	83	52%	55	34%	10	6%	161	6%		
	Y	16	9%	59	35%	69	41%	26	15%	170	15%		
Total		218	6%	1329	39%	1299	39%	519	15%	3365	15%		

### Key to panel abbreviations

BIO	Biological Sciences
BEC	Business and Economics
CPA	Creative and Performing Arts
EDU	Education
ETA	Engineering, Technology and Architecture
HEAL	Health
HUM	Humanities and Law
MKD	Māori Knowledge and Development
MATH	Mathematics and Information Sciences and Technology
MED	Medicine and Public Health
PHYS	Physical Sciences
SOC	Social Sciences and Other Cultural/Social Studies

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## Performance-Based Research Fund

Feedback template  
for

Special circumstances  
consultation paper

Feedback from:	
Contact details:	

## 1. Purpose

The purpose of this template is to provide a mechanism for collecting feedback on the matters raised as part of the PBRF Assessment Framework Consultation paper.

The objective is to obtain feedback in such a way that will speed the collation and review of feedback pertaining to specific areas of interest.

Respondents are encouraged to use this template to provide feedback, but should not feel limited in any way from providing comments in addition to those requested in the template.

### Timeframe for feedback

1. Completed templates and any other comments should be emailed to PBRF.2012Redesign@tec.govt.nz or can be posted to Dr Damien Cole, Tertiary Education Commission, P O Box 27048, Wellington 6141.
2. Feedback would be appreciated as soon as possible, but no later than 5pm, Friday 31 October 2008.

## 2. Questions

Which special circumstances should staff members be able to claim (section 5.2, particularly the summary in 5.2.8)?

Do you have views on the methodology used to assess which special circumstances staff members should be able to claim (Section 5.2)?

What impact should special circumstances have on the quality score and category? (Comment is particularly sought on options 3 and 4 of Section 5.3).

When should special circumstances be considered (section 5.4)?

