

**Tertiary Education  
Commission**

Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua



**Consultations 9 and 10  
In-principle decisions and  
summary of feedback: Technical  
Matters and Recognising the  
impact of the COVID-19 pandemic**



## Consultations 9 and 10 In-principle decisions and summary of feedback: Technical matters and Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

### Purpose

1. This paper communicates the Tertiary Education Commission's (TEC's) in-principle decisions in relation to Technical Matters and recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic as set out in the ninth and tenth consultation paper produced by the PBRF Sector Reference Group (SRG).
2. The paper also provides a summary of feedback on the proposals and options set out in the consultation paper in relation to these issues.

### Background

3. Following Cabinet's decisions in 2021, the SRG was convened by the TEC to advise on operational design changes to the PBRF Quality Evaluation 2026. The SRG delivers this function through a process of agreeing options and proposals for identified grouped issues, gathering sector feedback on those options and proposals through a series of consultations, considering consultation responses, and making recommendations to the TEC.
4. The TEC makes in-principle decisions based on the SRG's recommendations. These decisions are made on the understanding that the consultation process is ongoing and that other decisions or external factors may require the recommendations to be reconsidered as part of the process of developing the new guidelines for Quality Evaluation 2026.

### Next steps

5. The SRG will use the in-principle decisions as the basis for developing the draft Guidelines. These Guidelines will be provided to the sector and other stakeholders for consultation before they are finalised and published in November 2023. Notwithstanding paragraph four, above, the purpose of the consultation on the draft Guidelines is to ensure that the guidance is consistent, clear and unambiguous, not to re-litigate issues already consulted on.

### Sector consultation process

6. In December 2022, the SRG released a Technical Matters consultation paper, which included proposals on the:
  - › Platform of research – Contextual Summary field
  - › research output request and supply processes
  - › changes related to research output types, and
  - › Research Activity and Contribution to the Research Environment types.
7. The paper also provided an opportunity to comment on detailed EP design, with previous decisions presented in an illustrative template and guidance document.
8. In March 2023, the SRG agreed consultation options related to how Quality Evaluation 2026 will recognise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the assessment period. This discussion continued earlier consideration of these issues by the SRG in the first half of 2022, in the context

of Consultation 5 – Individual Circumstances. Earlier consultation occurred before the decision to delay the Quality Evaluation from 2025 to 2026 in response to the impact of COVID-19.

9. The SRG consultation papers provided background information, analysis, and options for changes relating to technical matters and to recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.
10. The public consultation process on Technical Matters ran from 19 December 2022 to 24 February 2023. The public consultation process on options for recognising the impact of COVID-19 ran from 24 March to 5 May 2023.
11. For both consultations, TEC officials directly contacted key stakeholders at universities, Te Pūkenga, the wānanga and PTEs. This included Deputy Vice-Chancellors – Research, Komiti Pasifika, Te Kāhui Amokura, Research and PBRF Managers at TEOs, and Chief Executives, as well the Tertiary Education Union (TEU) and sector peak bodies.

## Respondent summary

12. For the consultation on Technical Matters, a total of 10 responses were received. Of these, nine were from participating TEOs and one was a sub-institutional submission:
  - › Te Pūkenga
  - › Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland
  - › The University of Waikato
  - › Massey University Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa
  - › Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington (VUW)
  - › University of Canterbury
  - › Lincoln University
  - › The University of Otago
  - › Auckland University of Technology (AUT)
  - › Toi Rauwhārangī College of Creative Arts, Massey University
13. For the consultation on COVID-19, a total of 16 responses were received. Of these, 11 were made on behalf of institutions, organisations, or peak bodies, one was a sub-institutional submission, and four were made by individual researchers:
  - › Te Pūkenga
  - › Waipapa Taumata Rau, the University of Auckland
  - › The University of Waikato
  - › Massey University Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa
  - › Te Herenga Waka-Victoria University of Wellington (VUW)
  - › The University of Canterbury
  - › Lincoln University
  - › The University of Otago
  - › Auckland University of Technology (AUT)
  - › Massey University Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa
  - › Toi Rauwhārangī College of Creative Arts, Massey University
  - › Media Design School
  - › The Tertiary Education Union (TEU)

## Summary of sector responses and In Principle decisions

14. Set out below is a summary of feedback received, including any key concerns or issues raised, followed by the In Principle decision which has been made.
15. In reaching these in-principle decisions, the TEC has evaluated the SRG's recommendations against the following criteria to ascertain whether they:
- › Deliver Cabinet's instructions
  - › Address the concerns and aspirations identified in the Report of the PBRF Review Panel and the Report of the Moderation and Peer Review Panels
  - › Deliver fair and equitable outcomes for all participating TEOs and their staff
  - › Uphold the unique nature of research produced in Aotearoa New Zealand and reflect what is distinctive about our national research environment
  - › Are consistent with the PBRF Guiding Principles, including the three new Principles of partnership, equity, and inclusiveness
  - › Are able to be implemented and audited (legally and practically).
16. In addition, the TEC has evaluated the recommendations to ensure they align with TEC decisions and in-principle decisions to date, including on research definitions and EP design.

## Technical Matters

### Platform of Research – Contextual Summary

17. With regard to the Platform of Research – Contextual Summary, the Technical Matters consultation paper proposed:
- › The Platform of Research remains part of the EP, but no longer needs to set out information about the staff member's employment or other circumstances during the assessment period. As such, the character count is reduced from 2,500 characters to 1,000 characters and staff members are instructed to focus on introducing their research focus and platform, as well as any relevant aspects of their research environment. The Guidelines for TEOs and for panellists clarify that the component is not scored but should be used by panellists to inform their assessment of the two scored components, and by panels to inform their holistic consideration of the EP as a whole.
18. Of the 10 responses received, six respondents supported the approach, two responses suggested another option and two responses did not support the approach. Nearly all respondents provided similar feedback seeking clarification of the purpose of the field, its character length, and whether this length included spaces.
19. Respondents highlighted the need to ensure the field had a distinctive role compared to other fields. There was a range of views on the appropriate length of the fields: from 1,000 through to 2,500. The SRG considered this feedback in the context of looking at the length of all the proposed narrative fields in an EP.

### In principle decisions

Based on the recommendations of the SRG, the TEC has agreed in principle that:

- › the proposed approach to the Platform of Research is adopted. This section remains part of the EP but no longer needs to set out information about the staff member's employment or other circumstances during the assessment period. The Platform of Research should focus on introducing staff member's research focus and platform, as well as any relevant aspects of their research environment
- › the Guidelines for TEOs and for panellists will clarify that this component is not scored but will be used by panellists to inform their assessment of the two scored components, and by panels to inform their holistic consideration of the EP
- › the character count of the Platform of Research is reduced from 2,500 characters to 1,500 characters, rather than to 1,000 characters as originally proposed
- › the drafting of the Guidelines will address the more detailed feedback provided by the sector to ensure the purpose of this section is clear and distinct in the EP design.

### Request and supply of physical ERE Outputs

20. With regard to the request and supply of research outputs, the Technical Matters consultation paper proposed:

- › The expected default is that Main Research Outputs [now referred to as ERE Outputs – see below] are submitted as electronic versions, either via direct link or by uploading to the TEC filestore. In circumstances where a submitting staff member believes that a digital version of a born-physical ERE Output will not enable full and fair assessment, or a digital version cannot otherwise be created, the physical output can be supplied. Physical submission of outputs, accompanied by a brief explanation, are indicated in the EP by the submitting TEO.
- › Panellists will submit physical ERE Output requests within 15 working days of EP allocation.
- › TEOs will supply physical ERE Outputs within 15 working days of receipt of a request to supply from a panellist.

21. All ten respondents supported the proposals for request and supply of physical ERE outputs. The timeframes were seen as reasonable and achievable. Feedback reflected that most ERE Outputs will be electronic, but that the ability to supply physical outputs remains key within some disciplinary areas.

22. VUW provided feedback that the proposed field asking for a rationale for physical submission be reconsidered, as it was unclear how this information would be used, and suggested that the approach of just asking for a location should be retained.

23. The SRG considered this feedback and recommended that TEC adopt the overall proposed approach, while recommending that the TEC remove the proposed field for a rationale for physical submission.

### In principle decisions

Based on the recommendations of the SRG, the TEC has agreed in principle that:

- › the proposed approach to ERE Output request and supply processes is adopted and the expected default is that ERE Outputs are submitted as electronic versions, either via direct link or by uploading to the TEC file-store
- › in circumstances where a submitting staff member believes that a digital version of a born-physical ERE Output will not enable full and fair assessment, or a digital version cannot otherwise be created, the physical output can be supplied
- › the EP will not include a new field requiring a rationale for physical submission, as had been proposed
- › the proposed approach to requests is adopted and that Panellists will submit requests for physical ERE Output within 15 working days of EP allocation
- › the proposed approach to supply is adopted and that TEOs will supply physical ERE Outputs within 15 working days of receipt of a request from a panellist
- › discipline-specific advice will be provided in the Panel Specific Guidelines where needed to clarify what sorts of physical submissions a panel expects to consider.

### EP structure

24. In providing feedback on the Platform of Research – Contextual Summary, most respondents focused on getting the right balance and length of narrative fields within the EP. Based on this, the SRG reviewed the overall balance of fields and character lengths in the proposed EP design and recommended some adjustments.
25. Having considered this feedback carefully, the most significant changes the SRG proposed were to make the ERE contextual narrative 1,500 characters and to remove the requirement to provide a 1,500-character narrative for Research Activities. As part of this discussion, the SRG also endorsed a suggestion from The University of Auckland to shorten the CRE narrative fields from 1,500 characters to 1,000 characters.
26. Feedback also highlighted the importance of the Individual Contribution field for jointly-authored work, the status of datasets, and suggested amendments to some research output type descriptions including, for example, in Creative Arts and Software. The SRG made recommendations in each of these areas.

### In principle decisions

Based on the recommendations of the SRG, the TEC has agreed in principle that:

- › the EP's narrative field character-length counts will be as follows:
  - a. as above, the Platform of Research – Contextual Narrative increases from 1,000 to 1,500
  - b. the ERE contextual narrative remains at 1,500 characters
  - c. proposed Research Activity narratives of 1,500 characters in the Supplementary Items and OERE sections are removed. Any narrative related to these items should be included in the ERE contextual narrative or OERE contextual narrative
  - d. the Contribution to the Research Environment (CRE) narrative for each item is reduced from 1,500 to 1,000 characters.
- › the order of items in an ERE will place the Contextual Narrative first, rather than the ERE Output
- › language regarding 'Core Research Output' and 'Main Research Object' has been reviewed as the difference in meaning between these two terms is unclear and both terms shift the focus back to older approach of an NRO. The new term "ERE Output" is adopted.
- › the completion of the Individual Contribution field is compulsory for ERE Outputs that have more than one author. This does not mean that collaborative work cannot be submitted, or that an individual within a group must always be identified as a lead author
- › a Dataset can be included as an ERE Output if it meets PBRF definition of research
- › consideration will be given to ensuring that the main Guidelines and Panel Specific Guidelines have updated definitions of Creative output types and Software output types.

### Research outputs and activities, CRE types

27. The Technical Matters paper also proposed:

- › adding a new research output type called "Products and processes"
- › minor changes to the descriptions of research output types
- › descriptions for six types of Research Activity, a new item largely based on the types previously included in the Research Contribution part of EPs
- › seven types of Contributions to the Research Environment, with six of these types based on the previous Research Contribution types and one new proposed type.

28. Most respondents who commented on the proposed "Products and Processes" research output type saw the types of outputs it includes as covered by other existing types. However, its adoption was strongly supported by Te Pūkenga and after discussion the SRG recommended its inclusion given that use of the types is optional.

29. There was a range of useful feedback on the changes to the descriptions of the Research Output and Research Activity types. The most significant point raised was that the descriptions for creative arts look outdated in some of the language used. The SRG recommended that TEC update these descriptions.

30. There was strong feedback that the 'Other CRE' type was not needed. After discussion the SRG recommended removing this proposed type.



31. There was feedback that “Research and Funding Support” should be a research activity instead of a CRE type. The SRG recommended that it should be able to be considered under either category. However, based on further TEC analysis of the Research Activity types and the CRE types this recommendation has not been accepted by the TEC.
32. The sector provided a range of more detailed feedback, which the SRG recommended the TEC take into account when drafting the Guidelines.

### In principle decisions

Based on the recommendations of the SRG, the TEC has agreed in principle that:

- › the proposed new Products and Processes research output type will be added. The Guidelines will clarify that some outputs may be classifiable under more than one of the types and clarify audit expectations regarding these
- › detailed sector feedback on a variety of other issues – including for example the definitions of Creative Arts output types and Collaboration – will be clarified in drafting the Panel Specific Guidelines and the main Guidelines, with input where appropriate from Panels
- › the Panel Specific Guidelines and the main Guidelines allow for some flexibility around potential overlaps between Collaboration and Peer Esteem items. This will be reflected in the EP schema.
- › the proposed ‘Other’ CRE type is removed
- › “Research Funding and Support” will remain an eligible type of Research Activity.

## Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

33. The SRG consulted on two options:

**Option 1:** A standalone COVID-19 impact provision which operates under the Achievement Relative to Opportunity framework, with a specific set of eligible COVID-19 impacts restricted to those which are above and beyond the general research activity impacts, and which have had a minimum impact of six months. These are:

- › Additional family, community, or caring responsibilities including childcare and home-schooling,
- › Health or disability issues requiring shielding or that were exacerbated by the pandemic or government policy,
- › Illness as a consequence of catching COVID-19 including Long COVID,
- › Psychological impacts as a consequence of bereavement, trauma, stress or fatigue,
- › Living in the Auckland metropolitan area for the duration of the 2021 lockdown, and
- › Research impacts which go significantly beyond those described above as being mitigated against by the twelve-month extension. These would likely need to cover situations where a researcher had been unable to carry out any of their planned programme of research due to, for example, cancellation of core funding or in-kind support; inability to carry out any required fieldwork or laboratory work for six months or more; or being required to take on a significant institutional COVID recovery role which necessitated giving up all research time.

**Option 2:** COVID-19 impacts are included within the Researcher Circumstances provision under the new *Force Majeure* type, and the same declaration processes and subsequent EP submission requirements apply.

The current *Force Majeure* type definition is revised as follows (proposed addition in italics):

- › A significant unforeseen natural or human-made event that has affected the quantity of research outputs produced and/or activities undertaken during the assessment period. These may include, but are not limited to, events such as earthquakes, including the ongoing impacts of the Canterbury earthquakes, floods, hurricanes, fire or other severe weather events, volcanic activity, pandemics, *including the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic*, armed conflict, or terrorist attacks. The impacts on research must have occurred within the assessment period and meet the six-month summative threshold. The events can have occurred during or prior to the assessment period in New Zealand or anywhere in the world.

34. Under both these options, the proposed declaration and validation process is the same as for Researcher Circumstances. EPs claiming COVID-19 impacts are subject to the same reduced submission requirements: a validated period of impact of six months – four years would result in a requirement to submit two Examples of Research Excellence (EREs); while a validated period of impact of more than four years would result in a requirement to submit one ERE.

35. For full details of the proposed options, see the consultation paper in Appendix 1.

### **Option 2 was preferred by a majority of respondents, but views were split**

36. Of the 16 responses received, five respondents supported Option 1, nine respondents supported Option 2, and two respondents supported taking a different approach.

37. The TEU was one of the respondents proposing a different approach to either of the options presented. It suggested a modified version of Option 1, i.e. a standalone provision whereby individuals are given the ability to add additional impact types not covered by the options consulted upon.

38. Te Pūkenga was the other respondent who selected ‘another approach’. Te Pūkenga noted that its staff didn’t express a clear consensus view on whether Option 1 or Option 2 was preferred, noting potential pros and cons with both approaches.

39. Looking at responses from TEOs that participate in the PBRF, Option 1 was supported by Massey University, AUT University, VUW, and Media Design School. Option 2 was supported by The University of Canterbury, The University of Auckland, The University of Otago, The University of Waikato, and Lincoln University. Meanwhile, all four individual respondents supported Option 2.

### **Respondent comments on Options 1 and 2**

40. Where respondents supported Option 1, they gave the following reasons: Massey University noted that by specifying impact types, this option gives guidance to TEOs and staff members on what is in scope and it allows individuals to identify and express their own experiences. AUT also saw the types as providing important clarity for TEOs to manage declarations in a transparent and consistent way. AUT noted that, if the same types were used as part of Option 2, it would support that hybrid approach.

41. Similarly, feedback from Te Pūkenga was that the list of impact types provided important clarity, which would discourage ‘wholesale uptake’ of the provision while allowing recognition of those it is intended to cover. VUW noted that the two options are quite similar, but preferred Option 1 on the basis that it allows more granular information about impacts to be seen by panels. The TEU supported the Option 1 approach of having a list of types, on the proviso that more could be added by individual submitters (i.e. free text entry).
42. Where respondents did not support Option 1, they gave the following reasons: The University of Canterbury noted its concern that the list of types made it seem as if the different impacts listed were equally significant, which it felt is not the case. The University of Otago, Lincoln University, and Te Pūkenga noted that having a list of types to choose from may lead to requests to add a further specific impacts and events, potentially making it an unwieldy approach over time. Te Pūkenga and The University of Waikato noted concerns that Option 1 would be more administratively complex.
43. Lincoln University, The University of Canterbury, The University of Otago, and The University of Auckland all noted that the impact of COVID-19 fits well with the new *Force Majeure* category under Researcher Circumstances, and so it made sense to adopt Option 2. They saw the introduction of *Force Majeure* as removing the need to have special categories of the type proposed in Option 1.
44. Many respondents, regardless of which option they supported, expressed concerns about how having a specific COVID-19 option will work. This included concerns about:
- › what implementation of these options would look like in practice and, in particular, what information would be presented in an EP for Panellists to see
  - › whether, due to its widespread impact, both of these options are likely to create a large and administratively challenging number of Evidence Portfolios with COVID-19 impact declarations in Quality Evaluation 2026
  - › if introducing a special measure and different impact types will lead to a growth in other sorts of special measures and types in future
  - › if the approach doesn’t specify types, it may be harder for individuals to know if they are eligible to make a declaration and for TEOs to validate these, potentially leading to audit errors
  - › it would create a significant workload if the approach allowed free text individual comments
  - › many individuals want to be able to tell their story.
45. These are important concerns and they were taken into account by the SRG and the TEC in reaching an in-principle decision.

#### **Clarification on Researcher Circumstances and submitting three EREs**

46. In providing feedback on the consultation options for recognising COVID-19, some respondents expressed concerns about the following scenario: a staff member has been impacted by circumstances that would meet the criteria for Researcher Circumstances (related to COVID-19 or otherwise) but they also have three EREs they want to submit in their Evidence Portfolio. There was concern from some respondents that the agreed Achievement Relative to Opportunity approach creates a situation where a staff member in this situation is not able to include three EREs despite being able to do so.

47. The SRG and the TEC would like to clarify that making a Researcher Circumstances declaration is optional even if one meets the criteria to make a declaration. Given this, every eligible staff member is able to submit three EREs in their Evidence Portfolio if they wish.
48. What has changed from previous Quality Evaluations as a result of the TEC's recent decisions is that if a staff member chooses to submit three EREs in their Evidence Portfolio they cannot also declare Researcher Circumstances. Researcher Circumstances is an optional, equity-based accommodation for staff members who have had a reduced opportunity to produce research during the assessment period and, as a result, *wish* to submit fewer EREs.

#### Clarification on Supplementary items

49. Some feedback sought clarification about how Supplementary Items figure in the assessment of Evidence Portfolios. This new item in Evidence Portfolios will be explained fully in the Guidelines.
50. The key information is as follows: Supplementary Items are an optional part of an Example of Research Excellence and can be Research Outputs or Research Activities related to the ERE output. The information provided and the types of Supplementary Item acceptable are the same as for 'Other EREs'.
51. If Supplementary Items are included in an ERE they will be considered as part of the assessment. However, as they are optional, a staff member will not be disadvantaged if they do not include Supplementary Items (or if they provide fewer than three) in an ERE.
52. The purpose of introducing Supplementary Items is to allow space for staff members to contextualise their ERE outputs with related items. This may be more or less relevant to an individual staff member depending, for example, on their specific research platform and their discipline. Given this diversity in the research sector, including Supplementary Items is optional and there is no inherent disadvantage in not including this type of item.

In making these changes, the TEC is creating space for EREs with no Supplementary Items, EREs with Supplementary Items that are all Research Outputs, EREs with Supplementary Items that are all Research Activities, and EREs that have a mix of Outputs and Activities. The best approach will depend on the researcher and the nature of their research activity during the assessment period.

#### In principle decision

Based on the recommendations of the SRG, the TEC has agreed in principle that:

- › the design of the Quality Evaluation will recognise the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic during the assessment period via the new *Force Majeure* provision within Researcher Circumstances.
- › the purpose of reduced submission requirements under the Achievement Relative to Opportunity framework will be clarified in the draft Guidelines
- › the Guidelines will clarify how the optional nature of Supplementary Items will work in the assessment process.