

# REFEF2021

Equality  
Impact  
Assessment  
July 2021



**University of  
East London**

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## Introduction

This Equality Impact Assessment (EIA) is reporting on the University of East London (UEL) submission in March 2021 to the 'Research Excellence Framework' (REF2021).

The purpose of the EIA is to report on the rigour and consistency of the application of our processes described in the Code of Practice, and the resulting outcome with respect to groups with protected characteristics, defined by the Equality Act 2010. The characteristics explored in this assessment, for which statistically significant evidence was available, are age, gender and ethnicity.

The report presents a comparison of the characteristics of staff submitted to REF2021 (those with significant responsibility for research, SRR) with those not submitted (NS). It assesses the impact and effectiveness of the University's Code of Practice in ensuring the fair treatment of staff. The EIA has been undertaken by the Research Excellence Team, reporting to the PVC (Impact & Innovation) and advised by the Office for Institutional Equity.

Observations based on the data will form the basis for recommendations for action and the strategy of UEL's Office for Institutional Equity.

## Background: Development and implementation of the Code of Practice

The Code of Practice was consulted on extensively prior to formal adoption by the Board of Governors in September 2019. The process involved discussions with the University and College Union; the College/School Deans; 'town hall' meetings with staff in each school; the Impact & Innovation Committee; the EDI Committee; Academic Board; and the University Executive Board.

Throughout the consultation, it was explicitly acknowledged that there was potential for bias in the self-reporting of evidence for having significant responsibility for research and being an independent researcher. Staff were presented with information related to the Equality Act 2010 and also with various university policies of relevance to ensuring equality, diversity and inclusion. They were invited to consider how any potential biases could be identified and mitigated.

Equality Impact Assessments are routinely conducted on the Annual Research Review exercise and on the bi-annual Academic Progression Framework ('promotion round'). The EIAs are reported to the relevant committees (albeit these have changed over the course of the relevant REF period). EIAs informed the development of the Code of Practice, which was then implemented as described. The appeal process was not invoked, giving us confidence that there was genuine agreement that the co-developed processes were clear and fair. The evidence for having significant responsibility for research and for being an independent researcher were clearly stated and, if a member of staff had the evidence, it was not disputed. For the selection of outputs, staff presented their outputs for review and participated in the decisions around which of their outputs would be used in the submission.

The evidence from this report will indicate the extent to which the Code of Practice embedded good practice in the identification of staff with significant responsibility for research, independent researchers and their outputs.

## Comparison with REF2014

REF2014 was a selective exercise: HEIs were not required to submit work from all staff with significant responsibility for research, but rather could be selective and only submit staff with four 'good' outputs. Staff with fewer than four were not submitted, unless they could demonstrate mitigating circumstances, in which case a reduction of one or more outputs was permitted.

Obviously, being selective also meant people were 'selecting' and when people make selections there is the potential for bias and unfair treatment. In REF2014, UEL submitted 157 (26%) academic staff.

In REF2021, HEIs were required to submit work from all academics who had a significant responsibility for research, regardless of the number of outputs that they had produced or their perceived quality. A non-selective exercise, requiring no judgement of quality of outputs, should not itself be subject to biases. Of course, it is possible that it will reveal underlying biases such as differentials in the opportunity to engage in research or the distribution of resources. It is also possible that judgements of quality would be made in order to remove 'significant responsibility for research', for example, by changing someone's contract to 'Teaching Only'. UEL made an ethical commitment to staff not to do this so that both accurate and equitable evaluation would be applied to all academic staff during the REF period (the University only has 8 teaching-only academic contracts and these existed pre- the REF2021 period). The University's academic progression framework gives parity of esteem for meritorious performance of academic roles that both do and do not include 'significant responsibility for research' with scholarship and research-informed practice an expectation for all. The Code of Practice specified a procedure whereby academics were asked to provide evidence that they had significant responsibility for research and were independent researchers. From 645 potentially-eligible staff, 238 (36%) provided evidence of SRR and submitted work to 13 Units of Assessment. The staff came from all six academic schools and the three research institutes. As expected, in most Units of Assessment, the numbers in the submission were substantially greater than in REF2014, with a 52% increase on REF2014.

Another key difference between the REF2014 process and the REF2021 process was the requirement to select outputs. In REF2014, all submitted staff had to contribute four outputs, unless they requested special circumstances to be considered for a reduction in this number. For REF2021, the submission required an average of 2.5 outputs per FTE, but crucially staff could submit as few as one and as many as five. Although we asked staff to indicate if they did have any special circumstances, the number who did were relatively small, we decided not to request reductions of outputs.

The following sections compare staff who submitted outputs (staff with significant responsibility for research, SRR) with those who were eligible for inclusion but did not submit outputs (NS), as a function of the protected characteristics. Although we did submit some outputs from former members of staff in some of the UoAs, these are not included in this analysis because the numbers were small. We address the issue of whether our processes in applying the Code of Practice had a differential effect on staff with protected characteristics. We also consider whether there were any intersectional effects.

## Age

The risk of being treated less favourably as a function of age varies by age. Younger staff may be less likely to have had the opportunity to establish their research career and may have fewer outputs or not be independent researchers. Older staff, on the other hand, may be treated less favourably with respect to access to opportunity or resources.

The age profile of staff with SRR, with a mean of 50.5 and median of 54, was slightly older than that of NS, with a mean of 48.3 and median of 44. The percentage of staff with SRR rises as a function of age. Most of this effect is accounted for by staff under 35, where only 14% were SRR, and over 65, where 60% were SRR (see Figure 1). Many of the younger staff were either research assistants (thus not independent researchers) or lecturers without advanced degrees. As can be seen from the graph, the distributions within the three mid- and late-career age brackets (35-44; 45-54; 55-64) are similar for NS and SRR staff.

We conclude that although there was evidence of an effect of age on the probability of SRR, the effects are most likely due to: younger staff having less time to develop research careers; and decisions relating to the timing of retirement, with research-active staff more likely to work beyond State Retirement Age.

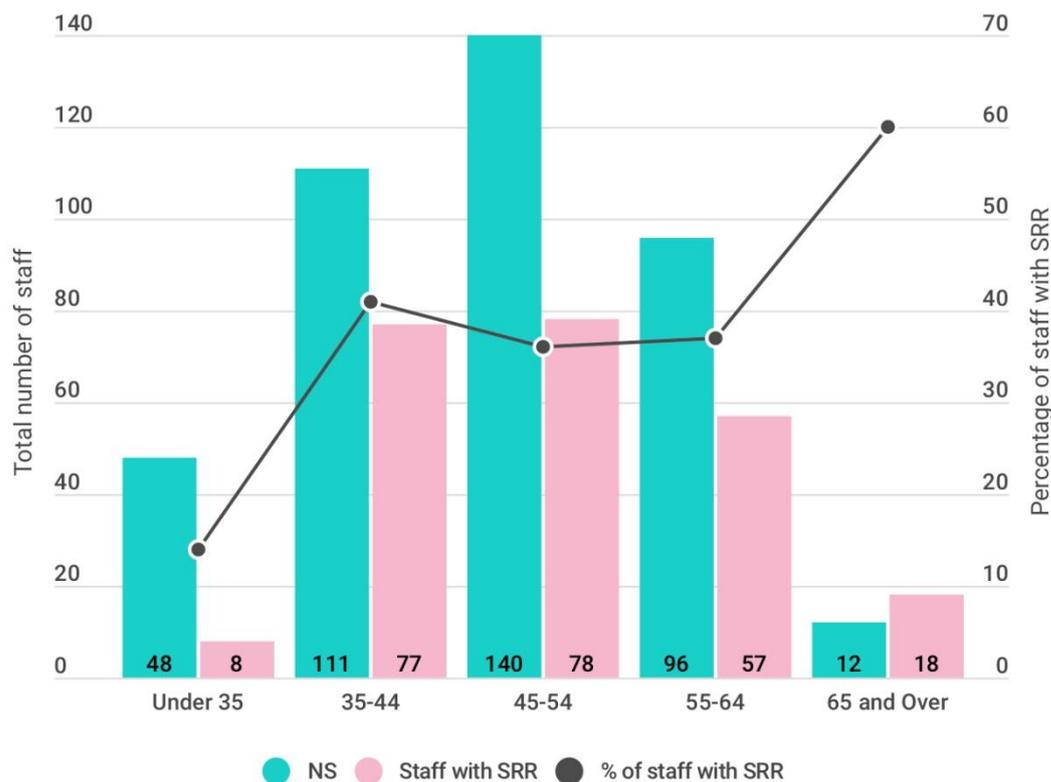


Figure 1 Graph showing the number of staff in each age bracket with SRR (pink) and NS (teal). Overlaid is a line graph showing the percentage of staff in each age bracket who had SRR.

## Gender

The risk associated with gender relates to direct discrimination (i.e., less favourable treatment, such as availability of opportunities and resources) but also indirect discrimination (e.g., the negative impact of a career-break on research or the disproportionate effect of caring responsibilities).

We found that slightly more men than women had SRR. Of the 326 potentially-eligible female staff, 111 (34%) submitted outputs compared to 192 (40%) of the 319 potentially-eligible male staff. Expressed another way, for staff with SRR, the F:M ratio was 47:53; for NS staff the F:M ratio was 52:48. However the difference was not statistically significant:  $\chi^2(1, N = 645) = 2.29, p = 0.13$ .

*Intersectionality:* When examined as a function of age, we noted both numerically and proportionately more female staff with SRR in the under-35 age group. However, in spite of similar numbers in the >65 group, a larger proportion of women in this group had SRR. In the two mid-career age brackets (35-44; 45-54) fewer women than men had SRR, nevertheless this effect of age and gender was not statistically significant:  $\chi^2(1, N = 238) = 4.18, p = 0.38$ .

To determine why a greater proportion of women had SRR in the >65 group, we looked at job titles: there were more men than women in management positions, without SRR. We conclude that to the extent this reflects a gender bias, is not in relation to the opportunity or motivation to stay beyond State Retirement Age to do research, but rather the opportunity or motivation to stay beyond State Retirement Age in a management position.

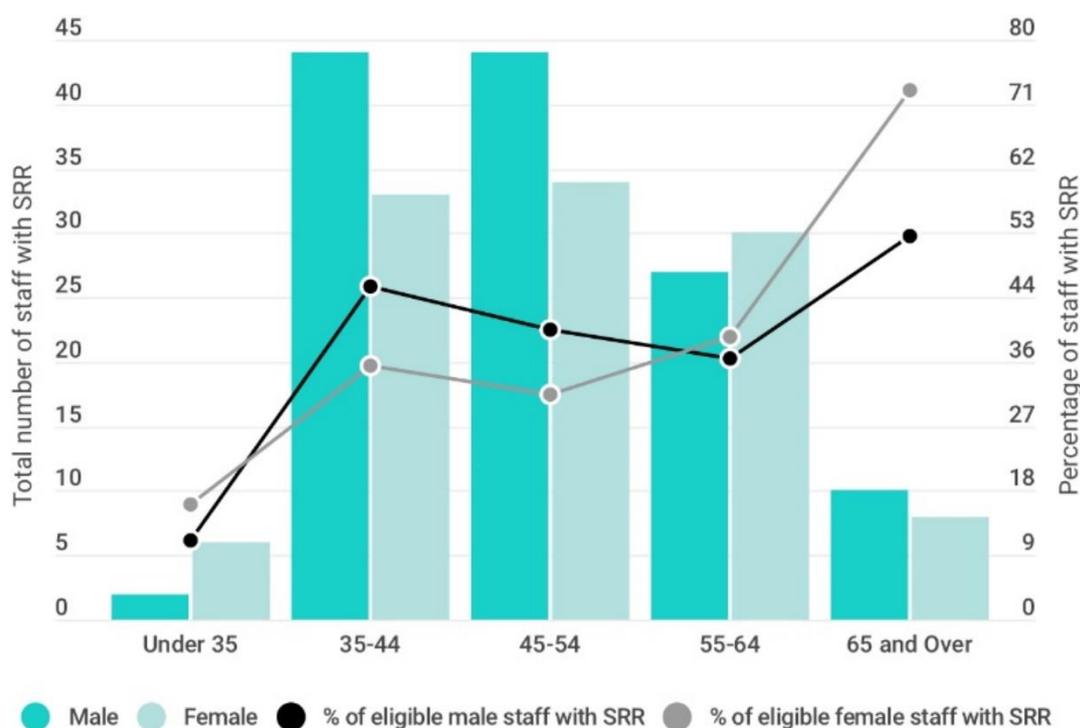


Figure 2 Showing the number of male (dark) and female (light) staff with SRR in each age bracket. Overlaid is a line graph showing the percentage of male (black) and female (grey) staff in each age bracket who had SRR. Numerical differences are not statistically significant.

## Ethnicity

The risk associated with ethnicity relates to indirect discrimination: however subtle, there is a likelihood that the process through which staff are enabled to take up research roles is shaped by elements of implicit bias (which might be termed 'white privilege'). Judgements and decisions which on the surface appear neutral or 'objective' are in practice are met by a smaller proportion of 'BAME' candidates (or are harder to meet by them).

Of the 645 academic staff, 31 (7%) did not declare an ethnicity. Of those who did, 418 (70%) declared that their ethnicity was 'White - British' or 'White - other'. For the purposes of this EIA, the remaining group of 196 (30%) staff is considered 'BAME-identifying', or 'BAME' (although we note that this is not a homogeneous category and within such a grouping there are likely to be diverse influences on the factors that enable productive research).

This proportion of academic staff who may be classified as 'BAME' at UEL is higher than for the general population (2011 Census: 87.1% self-described as 'white' or 'white British'). There was no statistically reliable difference in the proportion of BAME staff in the SRR group (33%) compared to the NS group (31%) ( $\chi^2(1, N = 614) = 0.16, p = .69$ ).

*Intersectionality:* In total, there are fewer academic females in the BAME category than males who have SRR. However, there are fewer BAME academic women than BAME academic men overall ( $\chi^2(1, N = 614) = 5.81, p < .05$ ). There did not appear to be an interaction of BAME and Gender identifications on the proportions of staff with SRR.

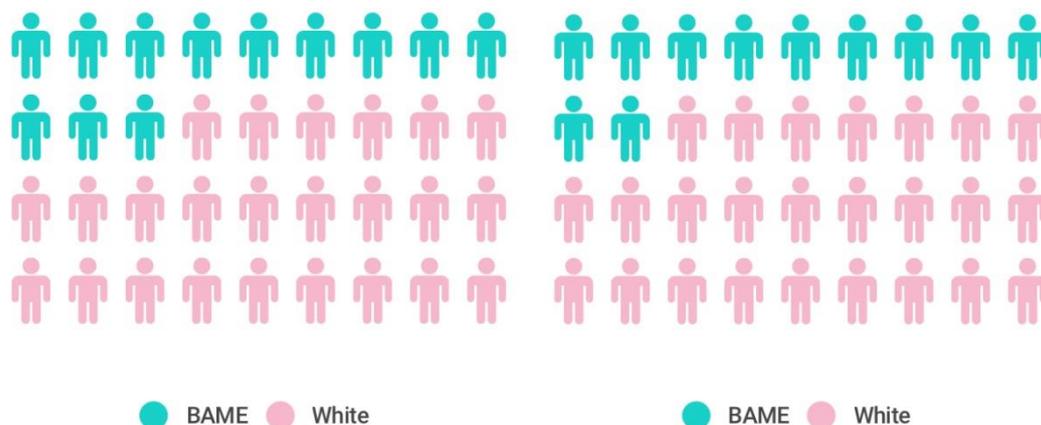


Figure 3 Infographic showing the proportion of staff in who identified as 'white' (pink) or BAME (teal) for staff with SRR (grouped on the left) and NS (grouped on the right). There was no significant difference in these proportions.

## Part-time working

Employment Law requires an employer does not treat those on fractional contracts less favourably. Nevertheless, there is a risk that working on a fractional contract may disproportionately impact the opportunity to conduct research, compared to staff on full-time contracts. The Code of Practice

explicitly stated that any teaching and research or research only contract greater than 0.2FTE could have significant responsibility for research if the other criteria were met.

Of the 645 potentially eligible staff, 228 (37%) had a fractional contract at the census date. Most staff on fractional contracts were 'permanent', not fixed term: of the fractional contracts, only 34 (15%) were also fixed term. Reflecting national trends, there were more women (n = 142) than men (n = 86) with fractional contracts. However, of the staff on fractional contracts, 31% of the women and 30% of the men were SRR. This indicates there was little discernible impact of fractional contracts on SRR.

### *Pregnancy and Maternity / Marriage and Civil Partnership / Sexual Orientation*

The number of people who disclosed data and/or the unreliability of the data over time meant that it was not possible to analyse the impact of family circumstance or sexual orientation in order to draw meaningful conclusions from the data. Nevertheless, the risk of less favourable treatment of staff as a result of these protected characteristics is mitigated by UEL's policies, including flexible working, parental leave and harassment and bullying policies. Given that there was no selection process and given that these characteristics are generally not obvious or easily determined, direct discrimination as a result of the REF2021 process is unlikely.

### *Disability*

Disability covers both seen and unseen disabilities and is generally under-reported. Just 34 staff (under 6%) reported a disability, of whom 9 (26%) had SRR. This meant that 4% of the group with SRR reported a disability. The numbers are too small for statistical analysis.

### **Conclusions and actions**

Overall evidence of adverse impact was varied. Some under-representation of women in some areas is evident, whereas 'BAME' groups show up largely in proportion with their representation in the overall staff group. There was no evidence that these characteristics act in combination with one another to create a form of intersectional 'double disadvantage'. This is likely related to the fact that REF2021, unlike REF2014, did not involve the selection of staff based on perceived quality or absolute quantity of outputs.

We did observe some patterns in the data which will be monitored. For example, there was a clear effect of age, which appeared to interact with gender, albeit that this difference was not statistically reliable. In the mid-career age groups (35-44 and 45-54), there was a tendency for women to be less likely to have SRR. This is possibly related to family/caring responsibilities: although not reflected in maternity data, more academic women than men in these two age brackets had a fractional contract. In the oldest age bracket, it appeared that women were more likely to have SRR and less likely to hold management positions.

UEL's existing institutional action plans related to the Athena Swan gender equality charter and the Race Equality Charter outline specific areas for attention that complement this impact assessment, related to gender balance within research outputs, and analysis of research sabbaticals by ethnicity. These actions will be monitored by the relevant Charter Implementation Groups.

A recommendation has been made to the UEL Office for Institutional Equity to collect data on caring responsibilities and monitor any impact on research productivity.