

20th November 2018

Dear Co-ordinating Editors and Managing Editors,

A number of colleagues have contacted me about Cochrane systematic reviews and REF 2021. In particular with concerns that their institutions may not value these and may not want to use them as part of the REF process.

In July 2018 I wrote to Professor John Iredale, Chair of Main Panel A (Medicine, Health and Life Sciences) to ask about the place of high-quality systematic reviews in the REF process.

I did this in the light of the Royal Society/Academy of Medical Sciences joint report on '[Evidence synthesis for policy](#)' published in June this year. This report talks of seeking "to recognise and incentivise excellence in both subject specific and interdisciplinary evidence synthesis" in the Research Excellence Frameworks. In a [Nature Comment](#) which accompanied this, Christl Donnelly and colleagues (including Chris Whitty) noted that "evidence synthesis [should be] recognized as an exciting, intellectually challenging, high-status and respected activity for researchers, and one that underpins the identification of future research questions" and that "For the United Kingdom, this might involve the evolution of the Research Excellence Framework(REF), which will be updated in 2021".

Professor Iredale's reply included the following:

"As a veteran of 2008 and 2014 in addition to being Chair of Main Panel A 2021 I can offer you reassurance that high-quality systematic reviews are well received by the relevant REF sub panels. Additionally it is perfectly possible for high quality systematic reviews to score well in the REF process. Further I've not personally ever come across evidence of such outputs being systematically disadvantaged or discouraged."

This advice is entirely consistent with that which we received prior to the last REF. The key issue must surely be one of quality; what is a "high-quality systematic review"? I suggest that the reviews will need to be addressing an important question, be conducted to an extremely high standard (with either existing, new or novel methods) and be shown to have impact.

Best wishes,



Martin Burton
Director
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