

**Tertiary Education
Commission**
Te Amorangi Mātauranga Matua



PBRF Sector Reference Group – Consultation paper 10

**Recognising the impact of the COVID-19
pandemic**

Name	Status	Distribution
PBRF Sector Reference Group – Consultation Paper Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic	CONSULTATION PAPER	Public Direct feedback to: https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZY9H3VT Feedback due 5pm, 5 May 2023

PBRF Sector Reference Group – Consultation Paper 10: Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

Purpose

- 1 This paper sets out options developed by the PBRF Sector Reference Group (SRG) for how Quality Evaluation 2026 should recognise the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on researchers and TEOs.
- 2 These options have been developed following initial consultation with the sector as part of Consultation 5 – Individual Circumstances.
- 3 Following that consultation, in July 2022 the Minister of Education agreed to a one-year delay to the Quality Evaluation. The main rationale for this decision was recognition of the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 on all participating researchers and TEOs.
- 4 The SRG now seeks feedback on a revised set of options to determine whether additional COVID-19 mitigations are required in addition to the sector-wide recognition afforded through the one-year delay.

Background

Cabinet decisions on recognising the impacts of COVID-19

- 5 In July 2021, Cabinet released its decisions on changes to the PBRF, including an instruction to the TEC, in consultation with the SRG, to revise the extraordinary circumstances (now Researcher Circumstances) qualifying criteria to:
 - › Introduce a merit relative to opportunity element to allow assessment of research quantity in ways that promote equity and inclusion,
 - › Ensure the process collects and evaluates information in a sensitive way, and limits the number of people with access to this information,
 - › Review and potentially remove the minimum threshold of three years,
 - › Allow for part-time employment to be considered more deliberately throughout assessment, including potentially in this category, and
 - › Take account of the negative impacts of COVID-19.
- 6 The TEC has now made in-principle decisions, on the basis of the SRG's recommendations, which address the first four instructions. These decisions are set out in the [TEC In-Principle Decisions and Summary of Sector Feedback](#), available on the TEC website.
- 7 The SRG considers that any recommendations to the TEC in relation to addressing the negative impacts of COVID-19 must be consistent with Cabinet's wider instructions and the in-principle decisions to date in relation to Researcher Circumstances, particularly in

terms of promoting equity and inclusion and ensuring processes are sensitive and uphold individual privacy and mana.

Initial sector consultation and feedback on approaches to COVID-19 mitigations

- 8 In Consultation Paper 5, the SRG sought the sector's views on how the Quality Evaluation should recognise the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on individual researchers. The approach was one of information-gathering, rather than proposing a set of options, and questions included:
 - › Whether an Extraordinary Circumstances model (now Researcher Circumstances) was the only or best approach, or whether other ways of recognising impacts existed,
 - › If following a Researcher Circumstances model, whether COVID-19 impact provisions were best presented as a standalone section, similar to how the Canterbury Earthquakes provisions were treated, or as a sub-type,
 - › What types of impact should be eligible for recognition, and
 - › How COVID-19 impacts should be declared, bearing in mind the widespread extent of impacts across the research community and the need to keep TEO compliance costs and administrative workload manageable.
- 9 Full details of the questions asked can be found in Consultation Paper 5, available on the TEC website.
- 10 While all consultation respondents agreed that the impacts of the pandemic should be recognised in some way, there were a range of views as to how to achieve this. Two key concerns emerged, which were related:
 - › Given the widespread impact, a Researcher Circumstances approach would likely lead to a majority of, if not all, submitting staff applying. The administrative workload associated with such an approach would be very significant. The University of Auckland and AUT noted that they would expect all their submitting staff to claim COVID-19 impacts given the much longer Auckland lockdown in the second half of 2021.
 - › Although most staff will have been impacted to some extent, impacts will have been experienced unevenly depending on geographic area, career stage, personal circumstances, research discipline etc, and for some staff the pandemic may have in fact created opportunities. Recognising the uneven depth of impact and ensuring that any provision did not exacerbate existing inequities for early career researchers, parents and those with caring responsibilities, and staff with existing health issues or disabilities, is both critical and a significant challenge.

Twelve-month extension to Quality Evaluation assessment period

- 11 During the consultation period for Consultation Paper 5, in May 2022, Universities New Zealand wrote to the TEC seeking a delay to the Quality Evaluation in recognition of the ongoing impact of COVID-19 on TEOs and individual researchers.
- 12 Following consultation with all TEOs that participate in the PBRF, the Minister of Education agreed a twelve-month extension to the assessment period and submission date for the Quality Evaluation, with the result that the submission and assessment process will now occur in 2026. This decision was communicated to the sector in July 2022.
- 13 In October 2022, the SRG considered feedback on Consultation Paper 5, including on approaches to recognising the impacts of COVID-19. The SRG agreed that in light of the twelve-month extension and the initial feedback, further sector consultation on a more specific range of options was appropriate.

Sector Reference Group process

- 14 Following consultation on the options set out in this paper, the SRG will consider sector feedback and will make recommendations to the TEC. The TEC will make in-principle decisions on the basis of the SRG's recommendations alongside officials' advice.
- 15 Any changes agreed by the TEC will be reflected in the Quality Evaluation 2026 Guidelines, as well as informing guidance and training for Panel Chairs and panellists. The draft Guidelines reflecting all in-principle changes will be released for sector consultation ahead of the final publication in September 2023.
- 16 In developing the options in this paper, the SRG has considered 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 Panel 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 inclusivity, and
 - › Are able to be implemented and audited (legally and practically).

Recognising the impact of COVID-19

Contexts informing the SRG's approach to developing options

- 17 In developing options, the SRG has had particular regard for the need to ensure any solutions are equitable. It is important not to further embed existing inequities, which the pandemic has highlighted and, in some instances, exacerbated.
- 18 The SRG recognises that the negative impacts of COVID-19 have, at a national level, disproportionately fallen on Māori and Pacific people and communities, women, people with caring responsibilities, people who are disabled or living with illness, people and communities living in areas of socio-economic deprivation, and those living in the Auckland metropolitan area.
- 19 There is significant overlap between some of these groups, which will have compounded the negative impacts experienced by some people and their communities. These inequities will to a large extent be replicated within the population of academic staff who are eligible to participate in the PBRF.
- 20 The twelve-month extension to Quality Evaluation 2026 recognises the general impacts on individual staff members' research activity and outputs, widespread across the sector. These are impacts not related to the specific inequities noted above which will have resulted in more severe impacts for some groups and individuals. The SRG considers that these general research impacts include:
 - › Closure of research facilities such as offices, laboratories and archives,
 - › Inability to carry out fieldwork due to restrictions on movement,
 - › Inability to attend conferences and other events, take up fellowships, or carry out other research-related activities,
 - › Increased teaching or administrative workloads,
 - › Loss of PhD students or postdoctoral fellows,
 - › Loss of external research partners, funding, or investment, and
 - › Loss of other research-related opportunities as a consequence of national or international COVID-19 restrictions.
- 21 The SRG acknowledges that these impacts will not have all been experienced by all eligible research staff to the same degree, but considers that the majority of staff will have experienced at least one of these.
- 22 In developing the options set out below, the SRG has also had regard for the in-principle decisions to date on individual circumstances, including the new Achievement Relative to Opportunity framework. The changes agreed mean that for Quality Evaluation 2026 the following groups will have reduced EP submission requirements:

- › New and Emerging Researchers,
- › Part-time staff, and
- › Staff who have declared valid Researcher Circumstances, which includes two new types of circumstance: *Career breaks* and *Force Majeure*

These changes are aimed at ensuring Quality Evaluation outcomes are more equitable.

Options for recognising the impact of COVID-19

- 23 The options set out below aim to recognise COVID-19 impacts that have affected (and may continue to affect) specific groups, or that have been more significant than the general research activity impacts discussed above.
- 24 This includes impacts on researchers with additional family or other caring responsibilities as a consequence of lockdowns; researchers with health or disability issues either caused by or exacerbated by the pandemic, or who were required to shield; and researchers who experienced psychological impacts as a result of bereavement, trauma, stress, or fatigue. In addition, these options include recognition of researchers who experienced research activity impacts that are demonstrably significantly more severe, including potentially a specific ‘Auckland-based researcher’ impact type.
- 25 In line with in principle decisions on the Researcher Circumstances declaration and validation process, the SRG does not consider that panels should play a role in ‘assessing’ the nature and extent of COVID-19 impacts or that COVID-19 impacts should be a factor in the assessment of EP quality. As such, both options propose voluntary COVID-19 impact declarations and that EPs submitted by researchers with validated impact declarations would contain fewer than three EREs.

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.

The 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 EREs; while a validated period of impact of more than four years would result in a requirement to submit one ERE.

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.

Next steps and consultation feedback

26 The SRG seeks the sector's feedback as follows:

- › Do you support **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.
- › Do you support **Option 2:** COVID-19 impacts are included within the Researcher Circumstances provision under the new *Force Majeure* type.

- › Do you have any other comments on the consultation paper ‘Recognising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic’?

- 27 Feedback can be provided through the online survey available here:
<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/ZY9H3VT>
- 28 The feedback period will run from 24 March to 5 May 2023. The SRG will consider sector feedback and make recommendations to the TEC at the end of May 2023.
- 29 The TEC will make in principle decisions based on the SRG’s recommendations and officials’ advice. These will be communicated to the sector when the full draft Guidelines are released for final sector consultation in June 2023.