

## REF panel for Clinical Applied Studies

### Classification of quality of potential REF Papers – Guidance

[This information is mostly taken from the official information from the last REF.]

Reviewers are not expected to carry out a critical appraisal of papers, or to review them in the sort of detail you would be expected to apply if you were reviewing for a journal. Remember these papers have been published – your job is to classify them according to the REF criteria (see below). Please take a balanced view of the strengths and weaknesses of each paper.

This is our first pass at assigning “star ratings” to papers. Nearer the REF census we will re-evaluate full papers so whatever you decide this time round will not be cast in stone. Each output will be reviewed by two people. When assessing the outputs look for evidence of the quality of the output in terms of its *originality*, *significance* and *rigour*, and apply the generic definitions of the starred quality levels. Outputs should be rated at different points within a quality level (high, medium or low – see the 12-point scoring system on the next page).

#### **Standard criteria and definitions of starred levels**

<b>Starred level</b>	<b>Criteria</b>
Four star	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Three star	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
Two star	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
One star	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

Note that national, international and world-leading should be interpreted in terms of quality, and do not refer to the locus of the research or where it is disseminated. Thus, research focused within one part of the UK might be of ‘world-leading’ standard. Equally, work with an international focus might not be of ‘world-leading’, ‘internationally excellent’ or ‘internationally recognised’ standard.

Look for evidence of some of the following types of characteristics of quality, as appropriate to each of the starred quality levels:

- Scientific rigour and excellence, with regard to design, method, execution and analysis
- Significant addition to knowledge and to the conceptual framework of the field
- Potential and actual significance of the research
- The scale, challenge and logistical difficulty posed by the research
- The logical coherence of argument
- Contribution to theory-building
- Significance of work to advance knowledge, skills, understanding and scholarship in theory, practice, education, management and/or policy
- Applicability and significance to the relevant service users and research users
- Potential applicability for policy in, for example health, healthcare, public health.

Unless there is sufficient evidence of at least one of the above, research outputs will be graded as ‘unclassified’.

The University have now adopted a 12 point scoring system, which maps across onto the original standard criteria.

### 12 point scoring system

REF score		Score	
4*	High	12	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
	Medium	11	
	Low	10	
3*	High	9	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
	Medium	8	
	Low	7	
2*	High	6	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
	Medium	5	
	Low	4	
1*	High	3	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
	Medium	2	
	Low	1	
	Unclassified	0	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

### Tips on how to identify 3\* & 4\* (potentially REFable) papers

- For systematic reviews – do they have any impact beyond a narrative summary? Are they using state-of-the-art methods? Is there a sophisticated meta-analysis? Final conclusions that ‘more research is necessary’ would not usually be sufficient.
- Look for clear international relevance. Papers with findings only applicable to particular health services or interventions, or clearly only applicable to the UK, may not meet the criteria.
- For descriptive studies, look for large samples (quantitative studies), generalizable datasets, sophisticated/innovative analyses and new important findings. Studies merely confirming what has been found elsewhere will not usually meet the criteria.
- Methodological clarity and rigour is vital for all study types. It should be clear where participants were identified from, what methods were used for analysis, and why, and how potential biases or other methodological limitations were addressed.
- Look for new and important findings with widespread applicability. Things that will change the way a health condition/disease is viewed, identified, managed, assessed etc.
- For non-empirical (theoretical) papers, look for detailed and rigorous argumentation in support of a proposition or conclusion, rather than simply expression of opinion, and evidence of novel theoretical insights.