

Periodic Assessment of Research, Development, Artistic and Other Creative Activities VER 2026

Final Report of the Health Sciences Sub-panel

Reference Criteria

Quality level characteristics that the panel considered important when assessing the outputs in the following categories:

- a) World Leading
- b) Internationally Excellent
- c) Internationally Recognised
- d) Nationally Recognised
- e) Below the Standard of Nationally Recognised Work

Given the large heterogeneity of the outputs in the Health Sciences section, it is impossible to strictly define which were the typical requirements or qualities an output needed to meet to be assigned to a given category, or the key differentiators that distinguished one quality level from another, and some level of subjectivity could not be avoided. However, there was a fair level of agreement among the reviewers, and the discrepancies were almost always small (one category), which indicates a good validity of the scoring process. As regards the category “Below the Standard of Nationally Recognised Work,” in most cases this was due to the output being submitted under an incorrect research area or consisting only of an abstract rather than a full publication.

Concerning qualitative indicators — particularly in terms of originality, significance, and rigour, the panel considered the content quality, relevance, methodological approach,

research design, strength of argumentation, theoretical contribution and interpretation (and, only for the social impact and creative environment, international collaborations and overall credibility). After an in-depth discussion, the Sub-panel agreed to use the following criteria to assign scores to the individual outputs:

Originality - Research outputs that demonstrate originality may do one or more of the following:

- produce new empirical findings or material;
- engage with new and/or complex problems;
- develop innovative research methods, methodologies and analytical techniques;
- show imaginative scope;
- provide new arguments, formal innovations, interpretations and/or insights;
- collect and engage with novel types of data;
- advance theory or the analysis of doctrine, policy or practice, and new forms of expression.

Significance: The extent to which the work has influenced, or has the capacity to influence, knowledge and scholarly thought, or the development and understanding of policy and/or practice.

Rigour: The extent to which the work demonstrates intellectual coherence and integrity, and adopts robust and appropriate concepts, analyses, theories and methodologies.

Overall quality of the Research, and evaluation process

The Health Sciences Sub-panel considered submissions from 13 institutions. Of these submissions, 3 were submissions based in Faculties of Medicine, 3 in Faculties of Physical Education/Sport, and 4 from Faculties of Health Sciences or Healthcare. There were also

submissions from Mechanical Engineering, Social Sciences/Healthcare, and Public Health/Nursing/Social Care.

Outputs

1. Overall, we evaluated 303 outputs.
2. Outputs were judged for their originality, significance, and rigour. All outputs were independently assessed by two Sub-panel members who then agreed grades. On the small number of occasions where agreement was not possible, a third Sub-panel member was asked to assess the output and a consensus grade was reached.
3. Some research papers assigned to us were of excellent quality and the submitting units are to be commended for sharing excellence in research. However, the overall quality of submissions was highly variable, with a small number of World Leading outputs but also a large volume of outputs that fall below the standard of nationally recognised research.
4. Many outputs described small relatively weak observational studies in a defined group or population (e.g., children in a specific school, small number of university students, or athletes from a particular team). Some of the research appears to have been initiated out of convenience rather than strategically targeting problems of societal significance.
5. Some of the strongest outputs were a small number of large international intervention studies and randomised controlled trials.
6. Many submitted outputs were in Slovak. It is challenging to understand how these could be considered as 'internationally recognised' as set out in the criteria given the limited reach for such outputs.
7. Some textbooks or chapters in textbooks were submitted. Whilst these are substantial pieces of work that could be important from a pedagogical perspective, they may not necessarily be considered research.

8. Many outputs were abstracts from conferences or symposia. It is challenging to assess and understand the originality, significance, and rigour from such brief research reports.
9. Some interdisciplinary outputs were monographs or reports written for the funding agency and therefore difficult to compare with peer reviewed journal articles.
10. Finally, many of the outputs marked as interdisciplinary did not in reality, fully meet the required criteria. The VER guidelines were very clear – an output assigned as interdisciplinary must demonstrate a meaningful contribution to each field in which interdisciplinarity is assigned, but this was not the case in half of the outputs.

Compared to the previous VER assessment for which some of us acted as evaluators, we have noted a general improvement in research outputs, particularly in applied health interventions, while improvements in the nursing sector appear less evident. However, this could be partially attributed to the specific nature of the sector, which, in contrast to other fields of research, appears to be more practical.

We noted that, overall, many outputs were focused on nursing, psychology and sports medicine. In contrast, few outputs evaluated the efficacy and safety of drugs, vaccines, healthcare models and management. Some strong outputs focussed on ageing issues but given the importance of the global demographic shift, these issues could be further developed. This is true given strategic investments in research on promoting health span.

Social impact

Social impact case studies were at times, outstanding, with clear evidence of impact such as commercial benefits, outreach to the community, changes to clinical practice or how older adults should be supported to remain active. Some units submitted more than one

social impact case study and this reflects more applied, translational research which makes a difference to the wider community beyond academic papers.

Some applications were very well written with the grading in mind following the requested format, but several others did not follow the template very well and it is therefore problematic to rate these submissions. Several applications did not quantify or describe the social impact at all. There was a limited explanation of how things had changed because of the research – and there was a limited description of the primary beneficiaries. Several submissions did not explain how the underpinning research directly led to the described impact. Overall, it appears that many institutions did not carefully follow the guidelines that were provided and/or they failed to understand how to describe, capture and measure the stated social impact.

Furthermore, occasionally the social impact was described well but there was not much link to any research, so again not clear how to grade links between research and impact.

Creative environment

Some submissions carefully described their institution in terms of structures, but sometimes missing their infrastructure, logistics, and facilities. Moreover, they did not necessarily describe research strategy and how workplace conditions can support the creative environment in terms of research. Submitting institutions may need to consider how to configure and support research strategy, rather than configure structures around academic programmes. It may also be useful to consider how research strategy maps on to globally significant challenges.

Overall, it is important to recognise that this is the first time the social impact and environment statements were provided with outputs, but much can be learned from the good practices of some submissions for future evaluations.

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