

# Do mandates work?

Investigating the impact of the REF 2021  
Open Access Policy at the University of  
Leeds

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# Context: Institutional Repositories (IRs)

- First IR created in 2001 at Southampton; rapidly adopted by HEIs, especially in the UK – but until mid-2010s, deposit rates were low
- This resulted in debate over their usefulness and purpose (e.g. “green” OA route, where accepted manuscripts of published content are made available, vs. “grey” or unpublished literature)
- Mandates proposed as a solution
- However, some advocates were concerned this would alienate researchers



# Context: The Research Excellence Framework (2021) Open Access Policy

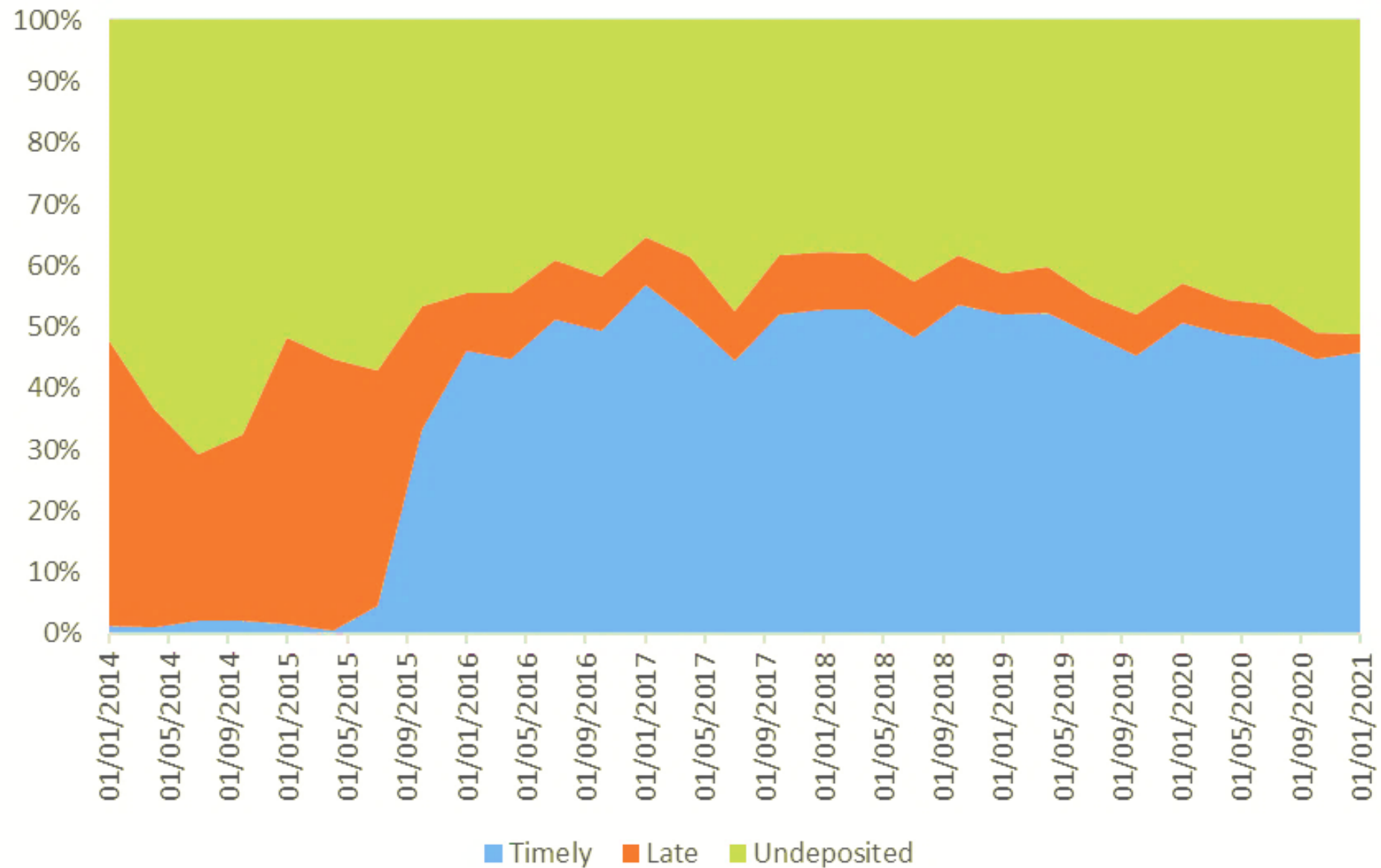
- The REF assesses the quality of research across UK higher education institutions, and is used to allocate funding – high priority for HEIs
- From 2016, the REF Open Access policy requires OA either via the publisher, or deposit in a suitable repository within specific deadlines
- If mandates work, this should have had a big impact



# Project Methodology

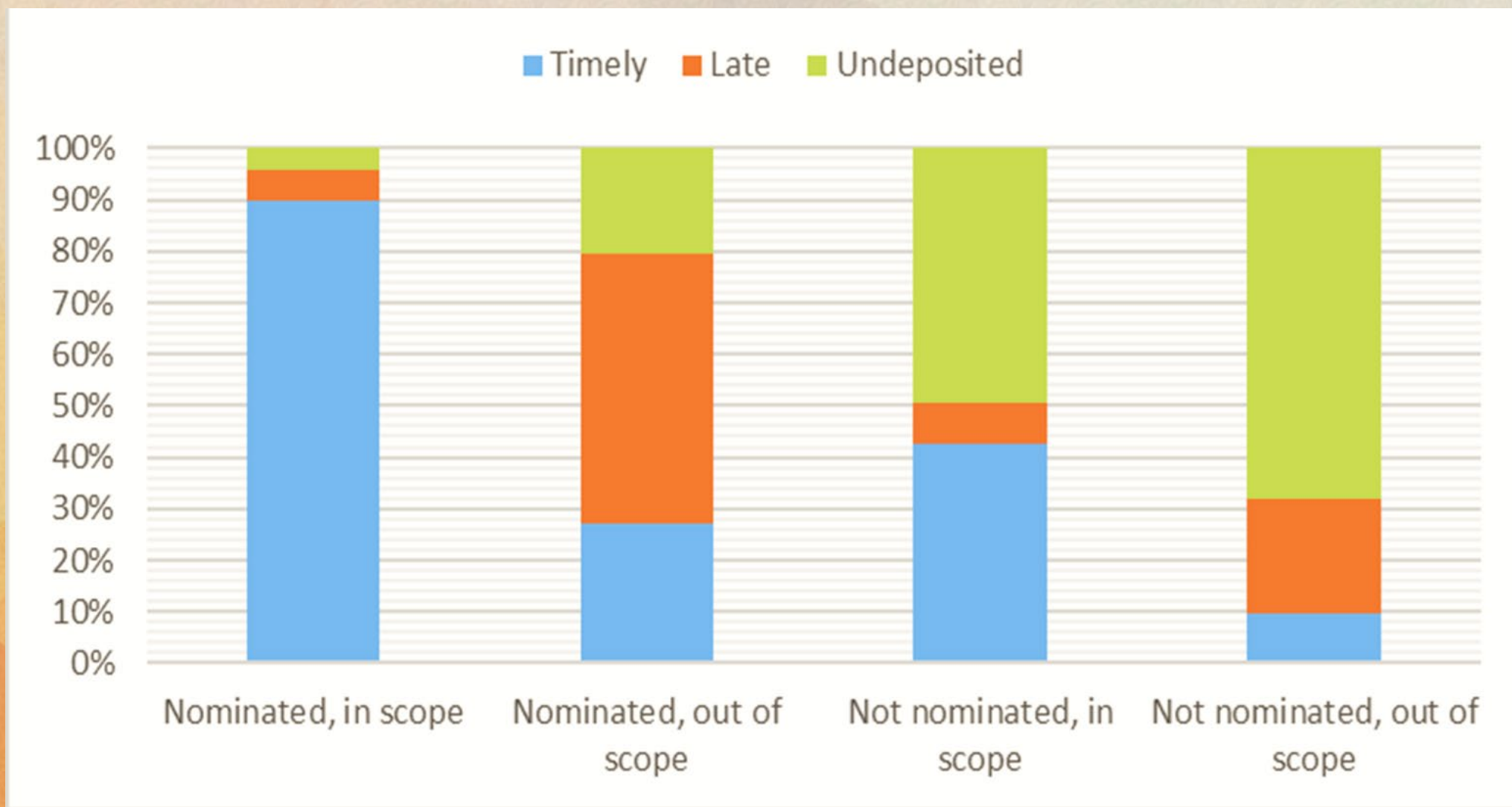
- Analysed data on deposits into Leeds' shared IR (White Rose Research Online), assessing the correlation between deposit and the REF OA policy
- For more qualitative information on the impact of the policy, interviews were conducted with School / Faculty administrators who supported Open Access during the REF period; thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and draw out a narrative

# Deposit Status of Outputs over Time (%)





# Deposit, policy applicability and nomination status



# Interviews

- 9 interviews with School / Faculty administrators who support Open Access, from all University of Leeds faculties except Medicine & Health
- Interviews were semi-structured; covered all topics but allowed conversation to flow somewhat naturally
- Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis (content coded based on meaning / interpretation, then structured into themes)



# Theme 1: Lack of Resistance

Compliance with the REF policy is now embedded practice...

everybody just gets on with it

it just feels like it's very deeply embedded now and no one sort of questions it now

they just accept that it's necessary

people are kind of used to that now

everyone's just sort of like, this was this was enacted seven years ago and we've got very little interest in it. Just carry on, just used to it



...and meets with little resistance from researchers...

## Copyright

Now and again people will say oh this won't be made public straight away, will it? 'Cause you know it might interfere with the copyright agreement that I've just signed

...we'll make sure that we don't break copyright so you don't need to worry about it. And they're all very happy to go with that.

they obviously just want to keep to the terms of the contract that they've set out and make sure they're not going against that.



...and meets with little resistance from researchers...

Making non-final versions  
available

they've been like oh but [...] there's a couple of really small things like spelling mistakes or something like that wrong in it, is that the version has to go in and I was like, yes it is

we had one person who didn't really want to send us it because they're like but it's just stupid that we're putting this version out there [...] if we know it's gonna change

as long as they can read the text, the formatting of it.... no, they just need access to the text



...though there is sometimes confusion

Accepted Manuscript  
terminology

quite a few times I've said oh  
can you let me have the AAM  
and they're like the what? [...]  
So I've tried to pull it in full,  
author accepted manuscript,  
but they still ask me what I  
mean by that

the accepted manuscript status  
is always difficult to explain

I can't really think of many times that people  
have queried exactly what version is required.  
I've cut and pasted the explanation of what  
the AAM is from the Library literature in the  
past and that seems to be clear enough for  
most people to understand



## Theme 2: All about the REF

The REF policy has effectively motivated institutional deposit...

if it's an important piece of work and they want it to go in for REF, then they're gonna make sure it gets on there

if we remind them to do it, saying that it's really important for REF obvious adds a kind of, yeah, a layer of urgency I guess

I'll say oh I notice you haven't yet sorted that out, and they'll say oh it's not REFable anyway [...] and then other times when people weren't engaging, I'd be like, you know, if you don't do this, it won't be able to be put into the REF and they'd be like oh! oh! oh!



(for the University as well!)

we as a team, with our REF focus in particular, we consciously focused our efforts on the staff, the papers, where we knew they were going to be REF eligible down the line, or we had a good inkling

It was the REF requirement after all that justified the heavy resourcing required across the University

If they took the open access thing out [of the REF requirements] I think some academics would inevitably just stop doing it, 'cause it wouldn't be so important; equally [...] we wouldn't be able to justify doing it for them anymore because it wouldn't [be] the best use of resources



...but deposit is not generally seen as beneficial beyond ensuring REF compliance

I think the main motivator is, is the REF if I'm honest [...] I think we might struggle a little bit to convince people that it's still a good idea... I think they would need some re-education on why else it's a good thing to do other than for REF

Sometimes people say, should I bother because I don't think it's going to be a REF output

I wouldn't say anyone's emerged as an Open Access champion or anything like that. I mean just because they are, for want of a better word, obedient, in providing AAMs quickly, I don't know whether that is a reflection on whether they support OA as a general sort of concept



...but deposit is not generally seen as beneficial beyond ensuring REF compliance

The REF in general can be a bit stick over carrot, you know, and [...] there can be a sort of tone in the REF guidance that's a bit scary for want of a better word, so they probably do see the open access as like another bureaucratic pain in the bum

maybe that can be brought out more that, that open access is part of a nice positive dream about freely available things and not like a nasty horrible thing to make your life harder



# Theme 3: Varying Engagement

Interest in Open Access and its benefits is increasing in some areas, but this is highly variable

## Age / Seniority

I think our younger researchers are finding that journal impact factors are less important than getting a paper out there Open Access. And many of them put their data on Open Access platforms and... and they just like to do everything online

people have been in academia longer than others, I won't say age, people who have been more enmeshed, and obviously like these things have come along [and] it's just like, why can't I just like send off my paper and then it gets published, yeah?



# Theme 3: Varying Engagement

Interest in Open Access and its benefits is increasing in some areas, but this is highly variable

## Discipline

It's to do with [discipline] being very traditional in its publishing routes [...] it's a such a long and established subject, so people just kind of like sit in the roots a bit more

I think it's up to the type of research they're doing. If it's [discipline] they are far more likely to use open platforms [...]. Traditionalists stick to the usual route of sending their manuscript to an established publisher, to well known journals [...] So it's not a question of preference. I think it's a question of exposure to the different type of publishing.



# Theme 3: Varying Engagement

Interest in Open Access and its benefits is increasing in some areas, but this is highly variable

Use of OA platforms as opposed to traditional publishing

Then we have other researchers who choose to use open platforms directly [...] They go first there, rather than trying all the established [journals]

I think the bigger problem for us is a long held snobbery and ingrained thinking around certain publishers, certain titles [...] that still drives thinking, whereas I think more of our younger colleagues - it is very generational - have really got on board with things like the preprint stuff.



# Theme 3: Varying Engagement

Interest in Open Access and its benefits is increasing in some areas, but this is highly variable

## Speed of Distribution

So the interest is we want to get this out so everyone can see it straight away in case it's going to feed into someone else's work. And move it along, move the science along

I'm sure that a lot of [discipline] don't wait for a paper of theirs on a case that's very important and highly revelatory to be in a two year embargo or anything like that. It just would fall flat

the researchers who are keen on this [Gold] – they work in a field that's quite fast moving [...] so they want to get it out there publicly available as soon as possible



# Summary

- The REF OA Policy does seem to have been effective in increasing deposits in the Institutional Repository
- There was little indication that the policy alienated researchers or provoked resistance
- However, there is also no indication that it has persuaded researchers that there are broader benefits to using institutional repositories for Open Access



# What Next?

- In the current environment, there is a place for mandated Green OA – in the right context this can increase the rate of OA dramatically – but more is needed for long term transformation
- Researchers who are engaged with Open Access may be more enthusiastic about other platforms, e.g. preprint servers and open access via the publisher - why?
- Could institutions make their repositories more relevant to researchers?



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