
REF 2028/23/01

Research Excellence Framework 2028:

Initial decisions and issues for further
consultation (REF 2028/23/01)



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REF 2028

Research Excellence Framework

Research Excellence Framework 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation (REF 2028/23/01)

To

Heads of higher education institutions in the UK
Subject associations

Organisations with an interest in commissioning and using academic research including businesses, public sector bodies, charities and other third sector organisations

Of interest to those responsible for

Research, Planning

Reference

REF 2028/23/01

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Enquiries to

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Executive summary

Purpose and key points

1. This document sets out the four UK higher education funding bodies'¹ decisions on the high-level design of the 2028 Research Excellence Framework (REF), its purposes and underpinning principles, and identifies areas for further consultation.
2. The REF is a significant policy instrument for driving research excellence across the UK. The exercise provides accountability for public investment in research and informs the allocation of around £2bn of block-grant research funding each year. The assessment also creates a strong performance incentive for HEIs to focus on high-quality research with tangible benefits for society and the economy. Given its impact on funding and reputation, the REF wields considerable influence over cultures and behaviours in universities.
3. Development of the assessment between exercises is necessary to reflect the changing research landscape. Through the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP), the four UK higher education funding bodies have undertaken analysis and consultation to inform development of the next national assessment exercise. Following the collection of a broad body of evidence, the Programme identified a number of drivers for change, which have influenced the changes presented in this document.
4. Redesigning the UK's national research assessment exercise offers an opportunity to reshape the incentives within the research system and rethink what should be recognised and rewarded. This comes at a time of a global shift towards more responsible research assessment and a greater understanding of the importance of research culture in underpinning excellent research with wider social impacts.
5. Taken together, the changes set out here expand our definition of research excellence and ensure that appropriate recognition is given to the people, cultures and environments that underpin a vibrant and sustainable research system. Building on changes made in the previous exercise, REF 2028 will be a more inclusive assessment exercise, capturing the valuable contributions of a wider range of researchers and research-enabling staff. Changes to the three assessment elements will allow REF 2028 to recognise and reward a broader range of research outputs, activities and impacts and reward those institutions that strive to create a positive research culture and nurture their research and research-enabling staff.

¹ The four UK higher education funding bodies are Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland.

6. A summary of the decisions and areas for further consultation can be found at Annex A.

7. Full details of the policy decisions can be found in Annex B and relate to:

- the volume measure;
- assessment elements and weighting;
- structure of submissions;
- submitting outputs;
- open access;
- required number of impact case studies;
- research underpinning impact case studies;
- Unit of Assessment (UOA) structure;
- panel appointments.

8. In a number of areas, we are seeking further input from the sector. The areas on which we are consulting are:

- the practical details concerning our proposed approach to the volume measure;
- the impacts and potential unintended consequences, and some practical details concerning output submissions;
- the impacts and potential unintended consequences of changes to the number and weighting of impact case studies;
- the UOA structure;
- potential measures to take into account the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

9. The decisions and consultation issues set out here relate to the high-level design of REF 2028. The sector will have the opportunity to input into the detailed guidance and panel criteria during the criteria-setting phase in 2024.

Action required

10. Higher education institutions and other groups and organisations with an interest in the conduct, quality, funding or use of research are invited to provide their views on a number of specific areas, as set out in Annex B. Please respond to the consultation via <https://engagementhub.ukri.org/re-research-policy/ref2028-for-further-consultation/> by **noon on 6 October 2023**.

Background

11. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs)². It was first conducted in 2014 and again in 2021. The REF will be undertaken by the four UK higher education (HE) funding bodies (hereafter, ‘the funding bodies’): Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW),³ and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE NI). The exercise will be managed by the REF team based at Research England and overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the funding bodies.

12. In December 2020, the funding bodies decided to undertake a programme of activities to review the way in which national research assessment is carried out in the UK. A Programme Board, made up of senior representatives from the funding bodies, was established to oversee the programme of activities. The decisions presented here were recommended by the Programme Board and endorsed/agreed by the funding bodies’ respective governing bodies. The group’s membership and terms of reference are available on the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) webpages⁴.

13. FRAP was launched in May 2021. It sought to identify, through consultation and careful evaluation, those approaches to research assessment that:

- encourage and strengthen the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact,
- support a positive, productive research culture, while
- simplifying and reducing the administrative burden on the HE sector.

14. An International Advisory Group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman⁵, has provided guidance and challenge to the Programme Board in its decision-making. The final report of the International Advisory Board can be found on the FRAP webpages⁶.

15. The decisions set out in this document respond to the key drivers for changes that have emerged from the evaluation and consultation activities set out at Annex D. They also take into account wider research policies and developments within and across the UK. The Research and Development People and Culture Strategy (2021)⁷ and the Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy (2022)⁸ provide important context for the decisions. The design of the next exercise is also firmly situated with an international move towards more responsible modes of research assessment, including the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA), which advocates for a research assessment that ‘recognises the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality and impact of research’⁹. Research England (as a Council of UKRI) is a signatory to the CoARA agreement.

² There are different regulatory regimes for Higher Education in place across the 4 nations of the UK, and differing terminologies. For the purposes of this document ‘HEI’ is taken to include ‘Higher Education Provider (HEP)’ a term used in England and defined in the Higher Education Act (2017).

³ From 1 April 2024, HEFCW will be dissolved and form part of the new Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (CTER).

⁴ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme>.

⁵ Full membership available at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme>.

⁶ <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme>

⁷ Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/research-and-development-rd-people-and-culture-strategy>.

⁸ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/review-of-research-bureaucracy>.

⁹ More information at <https://coara.eu/>.

16. Together, the changes create an assessment exercise that will underpin:

- a research system that produces **high-quality, rigorous** research that is **open** to all;
- an **inclusive and collaborative** research system that supports a **diversity** of people, ideas, institutions, methodologies, outputs, and activities; and
- an **engaged and impactful** research system that connects research with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change

Purposes

17. The FRAP International Advisory Group recommended that the funding bodies clarify the purposes of a future exercise and clearly distinguish between core purposes and inevitable consequences of the exercise. This was also reflected in responses to the FRAP consultation and recommendations in 'Harnessing the Metric Tide',¹⁰ both of which questioned the ability of an exercise to effectively fulfil many purposes.

18. Based on this advice and the outcomes from the FRAP consultation, the funding bodies have agreed that the next exercise should fulfil the following core purposes:

- inform the allocation of block-grant research funding to HEIs based on research quality;
- provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment; and
- provide insights into the health of research in HEIs in the UK.

19. The first two purposes are carried forward from REF 2021. The third expands REF 2021's purpose to 'provide benchmarking information and reputational yardsticks' to maximise the value of the rich evidence base provided by the REF.

20. A significant minority of respondents to the consultation suggested that driving a positive research culture should be a core purpose of the REF. The funding bodies recognise that the REF's impact extends beyond its stated purposes and that the shape of the exercise drives behaviours within the research system, often determining what is valued, recognised and rewarded more broadly in the HE sector. The funding bodies agreed that supporting a healthy research culture should be an underpinning principle of the REF, which influences all aspects of its design and conduct. At every stage of policy development, the funding bodies have considered the impact of their decisions on research culture within UK universities.

Timing

21. The FRAP consultation sought views on the timing of the next exercise. The largest number of respondents called on the funding bodies to strike a balance between currency of information and stability of outcomes, rather than prioritising one over the other. Overall, respondents felt that the current seven-year timeframe struck this balance effectively.

22. The funding bodies have therefore agreed that the next assessment exercise should take place in 2028. Submissions will be made in late 2027 and outcomes will be announced in December 2028. An outline timetable for REF 2028 is provided at paragraph 99 of this document.

¹⁰ Curry, Stephen; Gadd, Elizabeth; Wilsdon, James (2022): Harnessing the Metric Tide: indicators, infrastructures & priorities for UK responsible research assessment. Research on Research Institute. Report. Available at <https://doi.org/10.6084/m9.figshare.21701624.v2>.

Initial decisions

Guiding principles

23. Redesigning the UK's research assessment exercise offers an opportunity to reshape the incentives within the research system and rethink what should be recognised and rewarded. This comes at a time of a global shift towards more responsible research assessment.

24. The funding bodies' broad engagement with the sector has revealed several areas where the REF currently has – or is perceived to have – a negative impact on research culture and careers within the UK. These issues are discussed more fully in the sections below. A holistic approach to change is required to address these issues adequately and ensure that the next exercise encourages the diversity of people, ideas and outputs that is vital to maintaining the UK's dynamic and impactful research system.

25. As part of the FRAP consultation, the funding bodies asked the sector to identify the key considerations that should drive decision-making. The top three were identified as:

- robustness of assessment outcomes;
- impact of the system on research culture; and
- ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate.

26. Taking their steer from the consultation, the funding bodies have strived to ensure that the design of REF 2028 addresses the sector's priorities. However, there are areas where drivers for change sit in tension with one another, requiring prioritisation, for example, where measures to increase the inclusivity of the exercise may require additional effort.

Equality, diversity and inclusion

27. Support for an inclusive and diverse research workforce is a key feature of a successful and effective research environment, and there is ample evidence that diverse research teams produce the highest quality research¹¹. However, there remain inequities in the research system. It is important that research assessment should support diversity and enable change, rather than embedding or exacerbating existing inequities.

28. The REF will continue to be underpinned by the principles of equity and inclusion, and will include a number of measures to support equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI), including:

- An increased emphasis on research culture and the support for researchers, while moving away from direct scrutiny of the management of individuals by institutions.
- A refreshed approach to panel appointments, building on the learning from the previous exercise¹².
- The retention of an Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel, whose expertise will be further embedded into criteria-setting and assessment processes.

29. The funding bodies have conducted and published an initial Equality Impact Assessment for the initial decisions and will continue to update this as further decisions are made, please see the assessment at: <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/equality-diversity-inclusion-in-research-assessment>.

¹¹ See, for example: Freeman, R. B., & Huang, W. (2015). Collaborating with People Like Me: Ethnic Coauthorship within the United States. *Journal of Labor Economics*. [https://doi.org/0734-306X/2015/33S1-0015\\$10.00](https://doi.org/0734-306X/2015/33S1-0015$10.00). Yang, Y., Tian, T. Y., Woodruff, T. K., Jones, B. F., & Uzzi, B. (2022). Gender-diverse teams produce more novel and higher-impact scientific ideas. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 119(36), e2200841119. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2200841119>.

¹² Analysis and recommendations are contained within the final report of the Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel from REF 2021: <https://ref.ac.uk/publications-and-reports/equality-and-diversity-advisory-panel-final-report/>

Ensuring the REF is robust

30. As part of FRAP, the funding bodies explored the possibility of expanding the use of metrics in the exercise, including the viability of using technologies such as artificial intelligence and machine learning to support or streamline research assessment in future exercises. Two expert reports¹³ advised against moving to a fully automated or metricised approach, raising concerns around the robustness of outcomes and, in some cases, the relatively minimal impact on burden.

31. These findings are supported by consultation responses, which revealed strong reservations about replacing peer review with metrics, with only 7% of respondents supporting the move to a fully metricised system and 24% objecting to the use of metrics in any form. There was more appetite to use metrics to inform peer review of outputs and environment, provided that they are robust and used responsibly.

32. The funding bodies have therefore agreed that assessment outcomes will continue to be based on expert review, informed by indicators where appropriate. As in previous exercises, work will be undertaken to ensure that metrics are used responsibly in adherence with international good practice. While the evidence does not currently support the use of artificial intelligence in research assessment, the technology is developing at a rapid pace and the funding bodies intend to continue to explore possible uses in the further analysis of REF 2028 outcomes¹⁴ and for future assessments beyond REF 2028.

33. The assessment will be undertaken by an expert sub-panel for each Unit of Assessment (UOA), working under the guidance of four broader Main Panels. HEIs will be required to make submissions in each of the disciplinary areas (defined by the UOAs) in which they have research activity. The funding bodies propose to retain the REF 2021 UOA structure, set out at Annex C. Subject associations or institutions who wish to propose changes in the disciplinary structure are invited to do so via the consultation. A separate panel will be appointed to assess institutional-level submissions (see paragraphs 45-49).

Enhanced assessment of excellence

34. One of aims of FRAP has been to design an assessment system that encourages and strengthens the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact. To do so, the exercise must appropriately recognise and reward HEIs that create conditions in which excellent research and impact can be produced in the disciplinary areas that they support. The ways in which HEIs support their staff, enable collaboration beyond the institution, support the broad development of disciplinary knowledge and ensure the integrity of their research are all crucial components of research excellence. Research has demonstrated that research culture, underlying values and leadership are essential to creating high-performing research units¹⁵.

35. However, previous REF exercises have placed considerably greater weight on research outputs and impact than on the research environment in which they were produced.

¹³ 'REF outputs analysis: Maximising the use of REF data' and 'Responsible use of technology in research assessment'; and 'Harnessing the Metric Tide: indicators, infrastructures & priorities for UK responsible research assessment'. Available at <https://www.jisc.ac.uk/future-research-assessment-programme/evaluation-activities>.

¹⁴ Available at <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8982/1/ref-outputs-maximising-the-use-of-ref-data-main-report.pdf>.

¹⁵ See Manville, C, Hinrichs, S, Parks, S, Kamenetzky, A, Gunashekar, S, Wilkinson, BJ & Grant, J 2015, 'Characteristics of high-performing research units: A preliminary analysis' available at https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/external_publications/EP60000/EP67130/RAND_EP67130.pdf

36. The production of scholarly outputs remains a central and important route for the dissemination of research. However, stakeholders tell us the emphasis on outputs may drive resources towards production of ‘high impact’ outputs published in prestigious journals. The majority of respondents to the Real-time REF Review¹⁶ believed that the REF has had a negative impact on the authenticity and novelty of research, with individuals’ research agendas being shaped by perceptions of what is more suitable for the exercise. This includes favouring short-term outputs and impacts at the expense of longer-term projects, encouraging research that is more likely to be able to demonstrate and evidence impact in the short term, and staying away from areas perceived to be less likely to perform well in the REF – such as interdisciplinary research or research that is published in specialist journals. This also has an impact on the types of outputs that academics are encouraged to produce. Over 80% of the outputs submitted to REF 2021 were journal articles, with non-text outputs making up less than 3% of submissions.

37. Supporting and rewarding a diversity of research outputs is important for the progress of research and its dissemination to diverse audiences. There are important output types that contribute to the wider infrastructure of research fields that, as well as being important contributions in their own right, enable the research of others. Examples include review articles (including systematic reviews), meta-analyses, replication studies, datasets, software tools, reagents, translations and critical editions. Reaching businesses, policymakers and citizens also requires outputs in different formats, such as policy summaries or video or audio content.

38. Concerns have also been raised that the REF encourages institutions to focus on ‘exceptional’ impacts and those which are easily measurable, while under-resourcing activities that lead to less tangible impacts or those not well suited to assessment via case studies. One participant in an early roundtable commented that researchers were given ‘no safe space to fail’ when it came to impact, leaving them with little time to explore less certain avenues that may also potentially lead to impact.

39. REF 2028 will support a broader assessment of excellence by reshaping and renaming the three assessment elements (previously ‘outputs’, ‘impact’ and ‘environment’) to include a broader range of research and impact-enabling activities. The weightings of the elements have been rebalanced to increase the emphasis on research culture, people and environment. The new elements will be:

- People, Culture and Environment
- Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding
- Engagement and Impact

40. The funding bodies will also invite the expert panels to review the quality-level definitions (‘star ratings’) to ensure they accurately reflect an expanded understanding of excellence.

¹⁶ Available at <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8542/1/understanding-perceptions-of-the-research-excellence-framework-among-uk-researchers.pdf>

People, Culture and Environment

41. In REF 2028 the focus of the current environment element will be expanded to include 'People, Culture and Environment' and will contribute 25% of the overall quality profile. The collection of evidence for the people, culture and environment element will move towards a more tightly defined, questionnaire-style template that will create greater consistency across submissions and focus on demonstrable outcomes. This change in the style of the template will also minimise the preparation and assessment burden for HEIs and panels. We intend to collect evidence to inform the People, Culture and Environment element at both institution-level (IL) and at the level of disciplinary (DL) submissions, as appropriate.

42. There will be data and evidence requirements to ensure a focus on demonstrable outcomes. Some examples are provided in the 'Harnessing the Metric Tide' report, which also notes the need to ensure that any metrics adhere to the principles of responsible research assessment and are wholly related to an institution's research activity.

43. Further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators is planned and will include a strong consultative component with the sector and subject communities. As a starting point the funding bodies will use the definition of research culture developed by the Royal Society¹⁷, and will build on current sector level work on research culture, including the Concordats and Agreements Review¹⁸.

44. Discussions at a preliminary workshop held earlier this year emphasised the challenges with defining a single set of indicators for research culture suitable for the whole sector and recommended a more tailored approach¹⁹. We intend to develop a framework relating to research culture that will define core data or evidence requirements, while offering some flexibility for HEIs to tailor submissions to their own circumstances and priorities. Examples of potential indicators include EDI data (that are already collected via the HESA staff record), quantitative or qualitative information on the career progression and paths of current and former research staff, outcomes of staff surveys, data around open research practices, and qualitative information on approaches to improve research robustness and reproducibility. This list is indicative and does not signify that any firm decisions have yet been taken. We intend to commission further work in the second half of 2023 and provide further details on the framework early in 2024.

45. In its final report, the Institutional Level Environment Pilot Panel (ILEPP) concluded that assessment at institutional level (IL) is feasible and valuable²⁰. The report recommended replacing entirely the unit-level assessment of environment with assessment at institutional level. ILEPP considered that the assessment at the IL provides a more rounded understanding of the overall environment, strategic direction and support for staff, use of resources, planning and engagement of an institution than is provided by unit-level information. The panel argued that this appropriately reflects the responsibility that lies with the institution for creating and maintaining the structures of a supportive research environment.

¹⁷ The Royal Society definition is "Research culture encompasses the behaviours, values, expectations, attitudes and norms of our research communities. It influences researchers' career paths and determines the way that research is conducted and communicated."
<https://royalsociety.org/topics-policy/projects/research-culture/>.

¹⁸ Available at <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/research-concordats-and-agreements>.

¹⁹ A report of the workshop is available at <https://www.csap.cam.ac.uk/events/policy-workshop-research-excellence-framework/>.

²⁰ Available at <https://www.ref.ac.uk/publications-and-reports/institutional-level-environment-pilot-panel-final-report/>.

46. Feedback from the sub-panels, however, suggested that the environment statement at the level of research disciplines remains a valuable assessment element. It enables more granular and discipline-specific assessment of environment and creates a shared sense of responsibility for creating a vital and sustainable research environment. Sub-panels also expressed a concern that areas of disciplinary excellence would be lost (or areas of bad practice masked) in a single IL environment statement.

47. Bearing this guidance in mind, in REF 2028 the People, Culture and Environment element will be assessed at both disciplinary level (DL) and IL. The IL statement will be assessed by a separate panel.

48. The content of each statement will be determined in consultation with the sector to identify those areas most meaningfully assessed at each level. We will review the relationship between the content of the IL and DL statements, taking into account burden on panels and institutions, and clarity of assessment process.

49. The IL statement score will constitute at least 20% of the People, Culture and Environment sub-profile for each DL submission. The funding bodies may review the minimum contribution of the IL statement, depending on the distribution of content between IL and DL statements determined following consultation. The IL statement score will also be published separately to ensure transparency.

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding

50. The assessment of outputs will be expanded to include the assessment of an HEI's Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding within specific disciplinary areas. This element will contribute 50% of the overall quality profile. Reflecting the importance of scholarly outputs, the assessment will include both the consideration of outputs (as currently undertaken) and will be complemented by a structured explanatory statement, taken from the DL statement, which will make up at least 10% of the score for this sub-profile.

51. The funding bodies continue to welcome the submission of a very wide range of output types that are consistent with discipline-specific approaches to scholarly communication. We will work with the panels to continue to ensure that all output types are fairly assessed, including, but not limited to, practice research outputs, audio and video content, scholarly editions, software, datasets, and artefacts²¹.

52. The structured explanatory statement, taken from the DL statement, will present an evidence-based description of the institution's wider contribution to knowledge and understanding in the disciplinary area. The statement should also explain how the outputs submitted are representative of the research and researchers in the disciplinary area within the HEI..

53. Aspects of this statement will draw on elements previously captured in the environment element. The statement will also enable HEIs to showcase the wide variety of research undertaken, including those outputs that may have been judged to be 'risky' to submit, such as policy reports or patents. This approach also aims to recognise contributions that enable the research of others within the disciplinary community outside the submitting HEI, including the production of datasets, software, and translations. We will work with the main and sub-panels, once appointed, to define the framework for the content of the statement, ensuring, in particular, that the requirements are tailored for different disciplinary contexts. Any data requirements for the statement will be based on existing data collections as far as possible.

²¹ For a full list of output types please see Annex K of the REF 2021 Guidance on Submissions, available at <https://ref.ac.uk/publications-and-reports/guidance-on-submissions-201901/>

54. Together with the changes to output eligibility (see paragraphs 74-76 below), this broader approach to excellence in research will further cement the move towards assessing the performance of disciplinary areas within the HEI, rather than the outputs of individual researchers.

Engagement and Impact

55. In order to recognise and reward a wider range of impact-enabling activities, the 'impact' element will be expanded to include 'Engagement and Impact'. This element will contribute 25% to the overall quality profile. The assessment of impact case studies will be supplemented by quantitative and qualitative evidence, focused on outcomes and supported by data where appropriate, which sets out the wider contribution of the research activities to society and the economy. Feedback from the REF 2021 panels supported the reintroduction of an impact narrative that can recognise and reward approaches to maximising the impact of research. This information will be taken from the DL statement and will draw on elements previously captured in the environment element.

56. The explanatory statement will be weighted at a minimum of 20% of the Engagement and impact sub-profile, with the weighting adjusted for small submissions to ensure a balance between the statement and case studies. We intend to consult further on the potential impact and unintended consequences of changes to requirements in the number of case studies and the relative weighting of case studies and other evidence (see Annex B).

57. REF 2014 and 2021 guidelines required the research underpinning impact case studies to be of minimum 2* quality (internationally recognised). However, sector feedback has identified a number of issues arising from this requirement, in particular:

- gathering evidence for 2* quality was burdensome and was often based on approaches at odds with responsible assessment practices, such as the use of publication venue or citation data as proxies for quality;
- the geographic terminology of the star ratings led some institutions to regard research on local or regional issues to be ineligible.

58. Given the aim to understand excellence more holistically in a future exercise, the funding bodies have decided to remove the 2* requirement, encouraging the submission of a wider range of impacts based on a broader base of underpinning research. This is consistent with an expanded understanding of excellence in REF 2028. Institutions will nevertheless need to demonstrate that the impact is the result of research activities (as distinct from teaching activities, for example).

59. Responses to the consultation suggested that it was important to consider adding a criterion of 'rigour' alongside 'reach' and 'significance' to ensure that appropriate focus is placed on the process of delivering impact, alongside its outcomes. This may be of enhanced importance given the increased focus on engagement, and so the funding bodies will ask the panels to consider developing and operationalising an additional criterion.

Interdisciplinary research

60. Ensuring that interdisciplinary research (IDR) is both fairly assessed and appropriately recognised and rewarded remains a priority for the funding bodies. Evidence suggests that the measures introduced in REF 2021 concerning IDR were partially successful. The advice of an IDR Advisory Panel (IDAP) and the IDR sub-panel advisor network were successful measures in improving processes around the assessment of IDR and increasing institutions confidence in submitting IDR outputs. Analysis suggested that outputs from IDR were submitted for assessment at greater rates than previously²².

61. However, recommendations from IDAP²³ suggest that further developments are needed, including further embedding IDAP and sub-panel IDR advisers into both criteria-setting and assessment. The IDR flag on outputs was not consistently applied by HEIs and did not prove useful, and so will not be used in the future. The funding bodies will explore further the potential of automated approaches to identify IDR for the purpose of analysis and will continue to rely on the judgement of panel members (including IDR advisers) in ensuring all outputs are assessed by appropriate experts.

62. In recognising and rewarding a wider range of research activities, the next exercise will support the assessment of interdisciplinary research, whose processes and outputs do not necessarily follow traditional formats and may have been perceived as less likely to score well.

63. Similarly, removing the minimum 2* requirement for research underpinning impact case studies is intended to increase institutions' confidence in impacts arising from research that may not be presented in a traditional output form.

64. As in REF 2021, institutions will be assessed on their support for interdisciplinary research and wider research collaborations as part of the IL and DL statements. Guidance will be developed by the sub-panels and the Interdisciplinary Advisory Panel.

Structure of submissions

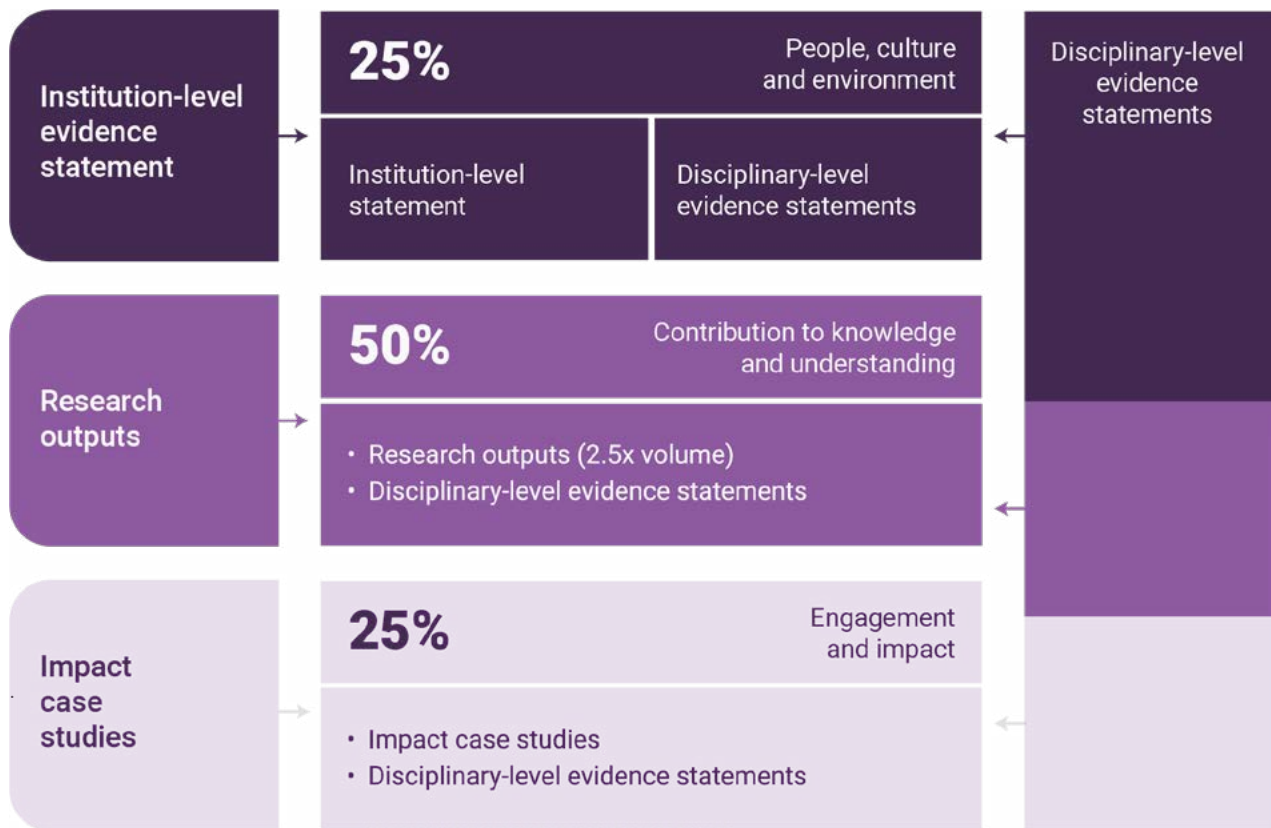
65. HEIs will be required to make submissions in each of the disciplinary areas (UOAs) where they have staff who contribute to the volume measure (with a potential exception for small disciplinary areas – see Annex B paragraph 8). Each submission will consist of the following components:

- An **Institution level evidence-based statement** that will be scored separately, and will contribute to the People, Culture and Environment sub-profile for each of the disciplines in which the institution makes a submission. The statement will take the form of a structured questionnaire and focus on quantitative and qualitative evidence. There will be strict word limits and we do not envisage long narrative components.
- A **Disciplinary-level evidence-based statement**, sections of which will contribute to all three quality sub-profiles of the assessment. The statement will take the form of a structured questionnaire and focus on quantitative and qualitative evidence. There will be strict word limits and we do not envisage long narrative components.
- **Research outputs**, which will contribute to the Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding sub-profile.
- **Impact case study/studies** which will contribute to the Engagement and Impact sub-profile.

²² Available at <https://repository.jisc.ac.uk/8982/1/ref-outputs-maximising-the-use-of-ref-data-main-report.pdf>.

²³ Available at <https://www.ref.ac.uk/media/1901/idap-final-report-designed-final.pdf>

66. A schematic to illustrate the relationship between submissions and assessment is provided below



Initial decisions

67. A thriving research system requires talented and diverse people and teams. It is crucial that a future exercise supports the full breadth of research careers and encourages mobility across careers, sectors, and nations.

68. When asked to identify the elements of research culture that should be prioritised in the development of REF 2028, respondents to the FRAP consultation placed significantly more weight on the exercise's impact on research careers and equality, diversity and inclusion than on any other aspect of research culture.

69. Feedback from institutions on REF 2021 indicated that changes to staff and output eligibility had increased the inclusivity of the exercise.

70. However, there remain concerns that the REF continues to place pressure on individuals to produce a certain volume of outputs. By placing requirements on submitted staff to submit at least one output, the exercise is seen to discourage institutions from employing researchers from outside academia, which prevents staff from moving between industry and academia (and vice versa), for example. In recent years, there has also been an increasing awareness of the importance of team research. The early FRAP roundtables revealed a view that REF 2021 excluded key members of research teams, particularly research-enabling staff.

Determining the Volume Measure

71. To ensure fair assessment, it is necessary for the size of HEIs' submissions to be related to the scale of their research activity. In order to capture the capacity in specific disciplinary areas, the volume measure must be based on a measure of input to the research process (rather than outputs or outcomes). The funding bodies have explored alternative volume measures, including research income, which was rejected on the basis that it is both an input and outcome of research. Revising who is included in the volume measure to include all research-related staff was also considered. However, there is significant discrepancy in how non-academic staff are currently captured in HESA, meaning that it would be extremely challenging and burdensome to determine accurately which non-academic staff contribute to producing or enabling research. Therefore, using data on the number of staff employed primarily to undertake research remains the most robust way to measure the capacity of HEIs in specific disciplinary areas.

72. However, this does not preclude a more team-based approach to assessing research that values the contribution of all research and research-enabling staff. Reforms to staff participation and output submission in REF 2028 will further break the link between the individual and the REF submission, focusing assessment on activity in each disciplinary area.

73. In REF 2028, institutions will not submit staff to the assessment exercise. Instead, the funding bodies will use an average full-time equivalent (FTE) over multiple years to calculate the volume measure. This means that the number of outputs and impact case studies required will not be directly linked to individual staff employed on a specific census date.

74. At the same time, the funding bodies intend to break any link between individuals and the content of the submission. This will allow the submission of outputs by any staff member, including non-academic staff, where a substantive connection to the institution can be demonstrated. This will include outputs produced by anyone employed by the institution on a minimum 0.2 FTE contract for at least 6 months in the REF assessment period, allowing staff to move between institutions and sectors with no detriment to their careers. The funding bodies are inviting views on further potential indicators of a substantive connection and will provide further guidance in the Guidance on Submissions.

75. There will also be no minimum or maximum output requirements for individual staff members, removing any disincentive for institutions to hire individuals without a substantial track-record of outputs considered suitable for REF submission, such as early career researchers or those joining from outside of academia, for example from industry or the public sector. As noted in paragraph 52, there will be a requirement for submissions to discuss the extent to which the outputs submitted are representative of the research and researchers in the disciplinary area. We will be consulting further on the impact and potential unintended consequences of the changes to the submission of outputs (see Annex B).

76. Together, these measures significantly open up the submission criteria for REF, providing a more equitable and inclusive approach to capturing a diverse range of research, research communities and research excellence wherever it is found. The inclusion of research-enabling and non-academic staff deepens and widens the pool of eligible submissions and has the potential to include previously excluded and underrepresented groups.

Proportionate administrative effort

77. The funding bodies recognise that the REF requires significant administrative effort and are committed to ensuring that this remains proportionate both in relation to the amount of funding allocated on the basis of its outcomes and in relation to the wider benefits of the exercise.

78. As part of FRAP, the funding bodies commissioned a cost/benefit analysis of REF 2021²⁴. The report estimated the cost of REF 2021 to be £471m, including £454m in costs to the HE community and around £17m in costs for the funding bodies. As a proportion of funds distributed, this represents 3-4% of the block-grant funding linked to its outcomes, compared with an estimated 12% for project funding in other parts of the dual support system²⁵.

79. Importantly, however, institutions valued many of the culture shifts resulting from these changes, such as greater inclusivity or more open research practices. The great majority of those surveyed believe REF 2021 represented moderate or high value for money. When considering the burden of the REF, it is important to distinguish those areas where burden is unnecessary or disproportionate from those aspects where REF-related costs have a beneficial impact beyond the exercise.

80. Together with institutional feedback and responses to the consultation, the cost study allows us to identify the following elements as causing the highest levels of administrative burden:

- supporting impact submissions,
- selecting outputs,
- identifying staff with significant responsibility for research,
- complying with open access requirements, and
- the process for requesting a reduction of outputs based on staff circumstances.

81. In identifying areas in which burden may be reduced, the funding bodies have taken into account the impact on research culture and the robustness of the exercise and have endeavoured to find a balanced solution. For example, there was support in some parts of the sector for an 'all output' submission model, requiring institutions to submit all outputs produced in the REF assessment period to be selected for assessment via random sampling. While this might have reduced the burden of selecting outputs, concerns were raised that it could discourage the publication of research not perceived to score highly in the REF. Practical concerns were also raised around institutions' abilities to identify accurately all research outputs, and the potential for gameplaying. It was also pointed out that this policy may affect disciplinary areas in different ways, where non-publication outputs are more prevalent, for example, or where the potential output pool is likely to be smaller due to publication practices.

²⁴ The final report of the Review of REF costs and benefits will be published on the FRAP webpages shortly.

²⁵ See: Emecz A, Millward C, Owenson G, Grubb G, Peatfield A, Parker J, LeMasurier A and Miller D (2006) "Report of the Research Councils UK Efficiency and Effectiveness of Peer Review Project", Research Councils UK. UKRI has awarded a grant to the Policy Studies Institute at King's College London to prepare an updated and more granular estimate of the costs of the peer review process in the UK. The findings should be available by summer or autumn 2023.

82. The cost analysis report makes three recommendations for reducing burden in a future exercise:

- where possible, maintain continuity with rules and processes from previous exercises;
- issue the REF 2028 guidance in a timely fashion; and
- align REF with other UK research policies.

83. Bearing these recommendations in mind, along with feedback from the sector, the funding bodies have taken a number of decisions outlined below to minimise the administrative burden of the next exercise.

Volume measure

84. The funding bodies will use the REF 2021 staff eligibility criteria to identify volume-contributing staff members. This will remove the burden of implementing new processes, as institutions will be able to refresh their REF 2021 processes, rather than being required to produce new Codes of Practice for identifying staff with significant responsibility for research or determining research independence. However, the funding bodies recognise that some institutions may wish to make more substantial changes to their Codes of Practice, building on learning from REF 2021.

85. We intend to calculate the volume measure for REF 2028 using data held in the HESA staff record, with the continued use of the fields identifying staff with significant responsibility for research and research assistants. We will also be working with HESA to add a REF UOA field to the staff record. By drawing staff data directly from HESA to calculate the volume, the funding bodies will remove the need for institutions to compile and submit a list of staff specifically for REF purposes, instead ensuring that this data only needs to be submitted once (via HESA). While this may require additional administrative effort initially, using average staff FTE over multiple years within the assessment period will enable institutions to build this into their 'business as usual'. Given the short period since the REF 2021 census date and the continuity in eligibility criteria, this should be less burdensome than rerunning the staff identification process after a gap of seven years. The modifications to the HESA staff record and its direct use for REF will also contribute to improving data quality and so its usefulness for broader analytical purposes, ensuring that administrative effort brings wider benefits beyond REF. We intend to consult further on the practical details of determining the volume measure directly from data submitted to HESA (see Annex B).

Output submission

86. Fully breaking the link between individual staff members and submitted outputs will simplify the output submission process, as units will no longer be required to attribute outputs to individual staff members with minima and maxima.

87. This reform also removes the need for the individual staff circumstances process and will enable the funding bodies to streamline and simplify the unit circumstances process.

Impact case studies

88. A number of institutions highlighted the burden of impact submissions on small units, who may struggle to develop two case studies. The minimum requirement of two case studies in REF 2021 was introduced to ensure the robustness of the outcomes and reduce pressure on those individuals associated with the case studies. Introducing the structured explanatory statement offers the opportunity to review the volume requirements for impact, as the score does not rest solely on the case studies.

89. The funding bodies therefore propose to reduce the minimum requirement to one impact case study for units with fewer than 9.99 FTE and to revise the boundaries to reduce burden across the board.

90. In addition to supporting a wider range of impacts, removing the requirement for impact to be based on research of minimum 2* quality will reduce burden on HEIs and individual researchers to find ways to demonstrate the quality of the research in REF terms.

Reusing data

91. There was strong support in the consultation for the REF to build on data currently gathered through other mechanisms to avoid unproductively duplicating efforts. In addition to using HESA data to calculate volume requirements, the funding bodies are committed to reusing data where possible, and the development of the structured explanatory statements will take the effective use of data as a guiding principle.

Aligning policies

92. Similarly, many responses to the consultation called for greater alignment with other research policies in the UK sector, with open access highlighted as a key area.

93. At the launch of the UKRI Open Access Review, the funding bodies agreed that any open access policy within a future research assessment exercise would seek commonality with the UKRI open access policy position. It is the funding bodies' intention that a UKRI open access compliant publication will be considered to meet the REF 2028 open access requirements without additional action from the author and/or institution. However, the funding bodies note that the scope of an open access policy for REF 2028 is much broader than the UKRI Open Access Policy and will consult with the sector before developing the full REF 2028 open access policy. The funding bodies commit to providing appropriate notice of any new requirements and prior to the announcement of the new policy the REF 2021 requirements will continue to apply.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

94. It is well established that the Covid-19 pandemic had far reaching impacts on the productivity of researchers²⁶. While the initial stages of the pandemic fell within the period of the previous assessment exercise (2014-2020), both direct and long-term impacts continued to be felt and persist into the current assessment period (2021-2027).

95. The funding bodies recognise that Covid impacts will have had more significant effects on some HEIs and some disciplinary groupings within HEIs. There is also evidence that researchers with some characteristics were more significantly affected than others²⁷.

96. As described earlier, the focus of REF 2028 is on the research activity of institutions rather than individuals. Nonetheless, the funding bodies are mindful of potential differential impacts and wish to allow for these differential impacts to be taken into account in the assessment. Our initial intention is to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021. We also intend to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice. Building on these initial proposals we intend to consult further on how best to recognise the impact of Covid.

²⁶The funding bodies recognise that Covid is not the only impact upon individuals and HEIs, with due consideration for protected characteristics accounted for in the assessment exercise.

²⁷ See, for example, Jens Peter Andersen, Mathias Wullum Nielsen, Nicole L Simone, Resa E Lewiss, Reshma Jagsi (2020) Meta-Research: COVID-19 medical papers have fewer women first authors than expected eLife 9:e58807 <https://doi.org/10.7554/eLife.58807>

Next steps

97. Following the publication of these initial decisions, further work is required to develop the more detailed guidance and criteria. This will take place through the following routes:

- a short, targeted consultation on specific policy aspects, as set out in Annex B;
- a discrete consultation on the REF 2028 open access policy;
- commissioned work on content and indicators for the structured explanatory statements and the revised People, Culture and Environment element;
- discussions with REF assessment and advisory panels when appointed.

98. Consultation with the HE sector and other relevant stakeholders will continue to be central to all policy development activities.

99. A timetable for REF 2028 is set out below.

Development timetable for REF 2028

Summer 2023	Initial decisions consultation Launch commissioned work on people, culture and environment indicators
Autumn 2023	Initial decisions consultation closes (6 October) Open access consultation Publish further decisions on REF 2028
Winter 2023-24	Invite nominations for panel members Appoint panels
Spring 2024	Publish open access requirements Panels meet to develop criteria
Summer to Autumn 2024	Publish draft guidance, and consultation on panel criteria
Winter 2024	Publish final guidance and criteria
2025	Complete preparation of submission systems
2027	Submission phase
2028	Assesment phase

Annex A: Summary of initial decisions and areas for further consultation

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
Timing	The next assessment exercise will take place in 2028. Submissions will be made in late 2027 and outcomes will be announced in December 2028.	None	N/A
Volume measure	<p>Institutions will not submit staff to REF 2028</p> <p>Staff data will be gathered directly from HESA to determine the volume</p> <p>REF 2021 staff eligibility criteria will be used to identify staff posts that contribute to the volume measure</p> <p>The funding bodies will calculate the volume using an average FTE of eligible staff across AYs 25/26 and 26/27</p> <p>Institutions will be able to request an exemption from submission for very small disciplinary areas</p> <p>Institutions will be able to undertake a light-touch refresh of their REF 2021 Codes of Practice, where appropriate</p>	<p>What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes?</p> <p>How might the funding bodies mitigate against these challenges?</p> <p>What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics?</p>	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
Output submission	REF 2028 will fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions	<p>What impact would these changes have on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics?</p> <p>What impact would these changes have on institutions in preparing output submission?</p> <p>What might be the unintended consequences of these changes?</p>	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	In REF 2028, HEIs will be required to submit 2.5 outputs per FTE of volume-contributing staff in each disciplinary area where they have activity	None	N/A
	Institutions may submit outputs produced by any staff member where there is a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution within the REF assessment period	<p>What may be the unintended consequences of allowing the submission of outputs produced by those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts?</p> <p>Should outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students be eligible for submission? If so, should this include PhD theses?</p> <p>What would be appropriate indicators of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution?</p>	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	Institutions will be able to submit one output to multiple submissions, provided it falls within the UOA descriptors	<p>Do the proposed arrangements for co-authored outputs strike the right balance between supporting collaboration and ensuring that assessment focuses on the work of the unit?</p> <p>Are there any further considerations around co-authored outputs that need be taken into account?</p>	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	There will be no minimum or maximum output requirements for individual staff members. However, units will be required to explain how their submitted output pool is representative of the research undertaken within the disciplinary area	None	N/A
	Given there is no minimum output requirement for volume-contributing staff there is no need for a process to account for individual equality-related circumstances	What impact would changes to staff and unit circumstances have on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics?	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
	REF 2028 will include consideration of the impact of equality-related circumstances within an overall process for determining potential reductions in output requirements at submission level. The process will not be based on the aggregation of individual equality-related circumstances.		
Open access	UKRI open access compliant publications will be considered to meet the REF 2028 open access requirements without additional action from the author and/or institution	The funding bodies will consult with the sector before developing the full REF 2028 open access policy	Open access consultation (Autumn/Winter 2023/24)
	Until new policies come into force, institutions should continue to follow REF 2021 open access policies	None	N/A
People, culture and environment	The focus of the environment element will be expanded to People, Culture and Environment	None	N/A
	This element will make up 25% of the overall quality profile	None	Consultation on Guidance on submissions and Panel criteria (Winter 2024/25)
	People, Culture and Environment will be assessed at both institution level and disciplinary level	The content of each statement will be determined in the criteria-setting phase in consultation with the expert panels and the wider sector	
	The score for the institutional-level statement will constitute at least 20% of the People, Culture and Environment sub-profile for each submission. It will also be published separately to ensure transparency	The contribution of the institutional-level statement to the discipline-level quality sub-profile will be agreed dependent on the content of each statement	Commissioned exploration of metrics/data/indicators (Autumn/winter 2023)
	The format of the people, culture and environment statement will move towards a more tightly defined, questionnaire-style template	Further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators for both unit and institutional-level statements is planned and will include a strong consultative component with the sector	
	There will be data and evidence requirements to ensure that the statements focus on demonstrable outcomes		

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
Contribution to knowledge and understanding	The assessment of outputs will be expanded to include the assessment of a unit's contribution to knowledge and understanding	None	N/A
	This element will include assessment of outputs and a structured explanatory statement	None	N/A
	The Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding element will make up 50% of a unit's quality profile	None	N/A
	The structured statement will make up at least 10% of the quality sub-profile for this assessment element	We will consult with the main- and sub-panels on the appropriate contribution of the statement in the context of specific disciplines	Consultation on Guidance on submissions and Panel criteria (Winter 2024/25)
	The explanatory statement will require HEIs to outline: - their wider contribution to knowledge and understanding in the disciplinary area, supported by evidence and data - the contributions that enable the research of others outside the HEI - how the outputs submitted are representative of the research undertaken within the disciplinary area	Further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators for the explanatory statement is planned and will include a strong consultative component with the sector.	Commissioned exploration of metrics/data/indicators (Autumn/winter 2023)
		We will consult with the main- and sub-panels on the appropriate content of the statement in the context of specific disciplines	Consultation on Guidance on submissions and Panel criteria (Winter 2024/25)

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
Engagement and Impact	The 'impact' element will be expanded to Engagement and Impact This element will include assessment of impact case studies and a structured explanatory statement which sets out the wider contribution research activities to society and the economy	None	N/A
	This element will include assessment of impact case studies and a structured explanatory statement which sets out the wider contribution research activities to society and the economy	Further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators for the explanatory statement is planned and will include a strong consultative component with the sector.	Commissioned exploration of metrics/data/indicators (Autumn/winter 2023)
		We will consult with the main- and sub-panels on the appropriate content of the statement in the context of specific disciplines	Consultation on Guidance on submissions and Panel criteria (Winter 2024/25)
	The Engagement and impact element will make up 25% of a unit's quality profile	None	N/A
	The structured statement will make up at least 20% of the quality sub-profile for this assessment element. The funding bodies intend to weight the statement on a sliding scale, proportionate to the number of case studies submitted to ensure that its contribution to the sub-profile is no less than that of a single impact case study	To what extent do you support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted?	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	The number of case studies required in each submission will be determined by the average FTE of volume-contributing staff in the unit. Institutions will be required to submit a minimum of one impact case study per disciplinary submission. The funding bodies propose to revise the thresholds between case study requirements.	What will be the impact of reducing the minimum number to one? What will be the impact of revising the thresholds between case study requirements?	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	In REF 2028, units will no longer be required to demonstrate that the research underpinning impact case studies is of minimum 2* quality	None	N/A

	Decisions	Area for further consultation	Means of consultation
Unit of Assessment	REF 2028 will retain the REF 2021 Unit of Assessment structure and will include advisory panels on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Interdisciplinary research	The funding bodies invite views from institutions and disciplinary communities on any disciplinary developments since REF 2021 that would require changes to be made to the UOA structure.	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
	A separate panel will be appointed to undertake assessment of the institutional-level People, Culture and Environment statement	None	N/A
Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic	The funding bodies intend to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021, and to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice	What is your view on the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?	Initial decisions consultation (summer/autumn 2023)
		What other measures should the funding bodies consider to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?	

Annex B: Further details on initial decisions and areas for consultation

This technical annex sets out in greater detail the key decisions taken by the four funding bodies on the shape of the next Research Excellence Framework. It should be read alongside the main 'Initial decisions' document.

To enable the development of more detailed guidance, the funding bodies are seeking views on a small number of key areas, which are set out below. Responses are sought via <https://engagementhub.ukri.org/re-research-policy/ref2028-for-further-consultation/> by noon on 6 October 2023. This timeframe takes into account the summer holidays, while ensuring the timely announcement of further decisions.

Volume Measure

1. In REF 2028, institutions will not submit staff to the exercise. Instead, data on research-active staff will be gathered from HESA to determine the volume of activity in disciplinary areas within HEIs. Submissions will not be limited to the outputs and impacts linked to these volume-contributing staff, nor will there be any requirement for volume-contributing staff to contribute to submissions.

Identifying volume-contributing staff

2. In REF 2021, eligibility was determined by whether a staff member had significant responsibility for research (SRR) and was an independent researcher. Institutions were required, where not submitting 100% of those on eligible contracts, to develop a process to identify those with SRR.

3. To ensure continuity, the REF 2021 staff eligibility criteria will be used to identify the staff posts that will contribute to the volume measure.

Determining the volume

4. In order to gain a more accurate representation of a unit's research capacity across the REF assessment period, the funding bodies intend to calculate the volume using an average full-time equivalent (FTE) of eligible staff across AYs 25/26 and 26/27, rather than based on the FTE of staff employed on a single census date. This will enable the volume measure to reflect changes across the period, such as the transition of staff from non-independent to independent researchers or changes in working patterns from year to year.

5. It is the funding bodies' intention that a future exercise, post-REF 2028, will use staff data from across the whole assessment period in determining volume.

6. From AY 24/25, institutions who intend to make a submission to REF 2028 will be required to complete the necessary REF-related fields on HESA, including the Unit of Assessment, Significant Responsibility for Research, and Research Assistant fields. The first year of collection will act as a pilot to ensure the robustness of data from 25/26 onwards.

7. The funding bodies intend to draw volume-producing data directly from HESA, removing the need for institutions to submit lists of staff.

Exceptions for small disciplinary areas

8. Institutions will be expected to make submissions in all disciplinary areas where there are volume-contributing staff. The funding bodies intend to retain the option established in REF 2021 for institutions – exceptionally, and only with prior permission from the REF director – to request an exception from submission for very small disciplinary areas, where the combined FTE of volume-contributing staff employed average over AYs 204/25 and 25/26 is lower than five FTE.

Codes of Practice

9. Given the continuity in eligibility criteria, the funding bodies intend to offer institutions the option to undertake a light-touch refresh of their REF 2021 Codes of Practice as they relate to:

- a. the fair and transparent identification of staff with significant responsibility for research and
- b. determining who is an independent researcher.

10. Changes to output eligibility, as outlined below, will require revised Codes of Practice relating to the selection of outputs.

11. The funding bodies note that institutional changes may mean that some institutions may wish to refresh or revise their Codes.

At this stage, the funding bodies are seeking further views on:

- What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes?
- How might the funding bodies mitigate against these challenges?
- What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics?

Submission of outputs

12. Under REF 2021 guidelines, the number of outputs required was calculated at unit level, with units required to submit 2.5 outputs per 1 FTE. However, each individual had to be submitted with a minimum of one and maximum of five outputs (with mitigations in place for those with specific circumstances). While introducing greater flexibility, this approach still placed requirements on individuals and limited the submission of outputs to those with at least one author from among the academic staff complement of the unit.

13. In REF 2028, HEIs will be required to submit 2.5 outputs per FTE of volume-contributing staff in each disciplinary area where they have activity.

14. Outputs will be considered eligible, where there is a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution within the REF assessment period. This includes outputs produced by anyone employed by the institution on a minimum 0.2 FTE contract for at least 6 months in the REF assessment period. It is necessary only to demonstrate a link to the institution, recognising that relevant outputs (i.e. those that fall within the UOA descriptor) may be produced by those in multiple administrative units within the HEI. This will allow the submission of outputs produced by any staff member, including non-academic staff, where a link to the institution can be demonstrated.

15. In REF 2021, where two or more co-producers of an output were returned in different UOA submissions, institutions could submit the output to any or all of the submissions. However, an output could not be included more than once within a submission. This struck a balance between supporting collaborative working and assessing at the level of the unit, both of which remain central to REF 2028.

16. While eligibility in REF 2028 is not linked to the returning of a staff member, it is proposed that the guidance continue to allow the submission of one output to multiple submissions, provided it falls within the UOA descriptors.

17. There will be no minimum or maximum output requirements for individual staff members. However, units will be required to explain how their submitted output pool is representative of the research undertaken within the disciplinary area, including in collaboration with other institutions or external partners.

18. Given there is no minimum output requirement for volume-contributing staff there is no need for a process to account for individual equality-related circumstances. The assessment will focus on the performance in disciplinary areas and is not related to specific individuals, departments or units. As a result, we will include consideration of the impact of equality-related circumstances within an overall process for determining potential reductions in output requirements at submission level. The process will not be based on the aggregation of individual equality-related circumstances.

At this stage, the funding bodies are seeking further views on:

- What impact would these changes have on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics?
- What impact would these changes have on institutions in preparing output submissions?
- What would be appropriate indicators of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution?
- What may be the unintended consequences of allowing the submission of outputs produced by those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts?
- Should outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students be eligible for submission? If so, should this include PhD theses?
- Do the proposed arrangements for co-authored outputs strike the right balance between supporting collaboration and ensuring that assessment focuses on the work of the unit?
- Are there any further considerations around co-authored outputs that need be taken into account?

19. Will not be based on the aggregation of individual equality-related circumstances.

Open access

20. It is the funding bodies' intention that a UKRI open access compliant publication will be considered to meet the REF 2028 open access requirements without additional action from the author and/or institution. However, the funding bodies note that the scope of an open access policy for REF 2028 is much broader than the UKRI Open Access Policy and will consult with the sector before developing the full REF 2028 open access policy.

21. The funding bodies commit to providing appropriate notice of any new requirements. Until new policies come into force, institutions should continue to follow REF 2021 open access policies.

At this stage, the funding bodies are not seeking further views on this policy. A separate consultation on REF 2028 open access requirements will be launched in Autumn 2023.

People, culture and environment

22. In REF 2028 the focus of the environment element will be expanded to People, Culture and Environment'. The format of the people, culture and environment statement will move towards a more tightly defined, questionnaire-style template that will create greater consistency across submissions and focus on demonstrable outcomes.

23. The People, Culture and Environment element will make up 25% of the overall quality profile.

24. People, Culture and Environment will be assessed at both institution level and disciplinary level. Building on learning from REF 2021, the two statements will be assessed separately, and we will review the distribution of content between them. It is intended that the institutional-level assessment will focus on the institution's policies, strategies and priorities with evidence of their impact on the whole institution. Disciplinary-level assessment will focus on areas of specific disciplinary relevance and will provide evidence of the impact of mechanisms to support a healthy research culture and environment in the specific disciplinary content. The content of each statement will be determined in the criteria-setting phase in consultation with the expert panels and the wider sector.

25. The score for the institutional-level statement will constitute at least 20% of the People, Culture and Environment quality sub-profile for each disciplinary submission. It will also be published separately to ensure transparency²⁸.

26. There will be data and evidence requirements to ensure that the statements focus on demonstrable outcomes. Some examples are provided in the 'Harnessing the Metric Tide' report, which also notes the need to ensure that any metrics adhere to the principles of responsible research assessment and are wholly related to a unit or institution's research activity.

27. Further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators for both unit and institutional-level statements is planned for Autumn/Winter 2023 and will include a strong consultative component with the sector.

At this stage, the funding bodies are not seeking further views on this assessment element. Consultation on content and indicators will take place as part of further work, including the development of the panel criteria.

²⁸ We will consult with the main- and sub-panels on the appropriate contribution of the institution-level evidence in the context of specific disciplines.

Contribution to knowledge and understanding

28. In REF 2028, the assessment of outputs will be expanded to include the assessment of a unit's contribution to knowledge and understanding. This will include both the assessment of outputs (as previously undertaken) and a structured explanatory statement.

29. The Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding element will make up 50% of the overall quality profile.

30. The structured statement will make up at least 10% of the quality sub-profile for this assessment element²⁹. The final weighting will be agreed in consultation with the REF 2028 panels.

31. The structured statement will require HEIs to outline their wider contribution to knowledge and understanding in the disciplinary area, supported by evidence and data. Aspects of this statement will draw on elements previously captured in the environment element.

32. The statement will also request information on the contributions that enable the research of others outside the HEI, including the production of datasets, translations, software, and reagents.

33. HEIs will also be asked to explain how the outputs submitted are representative of the research and researchers in the disciplinary area within the HEI.

At this stage, the funding bodies are not seeking further views on this assessment element. Consultation on content and indicators will take place as part of further work, including the development of the panel criteria.

Engagement and impact

34. In REF 2028, the 'impact' element will be expanded to Engagement and Impact. The assessment of impact case studies will be supplemented by a structured explanatory statement, focused on outcomes and supported by evidence and data, which sets out the wider contribution research activities to society and the economy. Aspects of this statement will draw on elements previously captured in the environment element in order to minimise unnecessary additional effort.

35. The Engagement and impact element will make up 25% of the overall quality profile.

36. The explanatory statement will carry a minimum weighting of 20% of the quality sub-profile for Engagement and Impact. The funding bodies intend to weight the statement on a sliding scale, proportionate to the number of case studies submitted, to ensure that its contribution to the sub-profile is no less than that of a single impact case study.

37. The number of case studies required in each submission will be determined by the average FTE of volume-contributing staff in the unit. Table 1 sets out the required number of case studies and the weighting of the impact statement.

²⁹ We will consult with the main- and sub-panels on the appropriate contribution of the statement in the context of specific disciplines.

Table 1: Number of case studies required in submissions

FTE of volume-contributing staff	Required number of case studies	Weighting of impact statement
Up to 9.99	1	50%
10 to 19.99	2	33.33%
20 to 39.99	3	25%
40 to 59.99	4	20%
60 to 89.99	5	20%
90 to 119.99	6	20%
120 to 169.99	7	20%
170 or more	8, plus one further case study per additional 50 FTE	20%

38. In REF 2028, units will no longer be required to demonstrate that the research underpinning impact case studies is of minimum 2* quality. Units will nevertheless need to demonstrate that the impact is the result of research activities (as distinct from teaching activities, for example).

At this stage, the funding bodies are seeking further views on:

- What will be the impact of reducing the minimum number to one?
- What will be the impact of revising the thresholds between case study requirements?
- To what extent do you support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted?

Unit of Assessment structure and panel appointments

39. The funding bodies propose to retain the REF 2021 Unit of Assessment structure.

40. A separate panel will be appointed to undertake assessment of the institutional-level People, Culture and Environment statement.

41. The funding bodies will also appoint two panels to advise on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Interdisciplinary research.

42. Further details on the appointment of panels will be published in early autumn and will take into account the feedback from the REF 2021 advisory panels.

The funding bodies invite views from institutions and disciplinary communities on any disciplinary developments since REF 2021 that would require changes to be made to the UOA structure.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic

43. The funding bodies intend to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021, and to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice.

What is your view on the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

What other measures should the funding bodies consider to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

Annex C: Unit of Assessment structure for REF 2028

Main Panel	Unit of Assessment	Weighting of impact statement
A	1	Clinical Medicine
	2	Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care
	3	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy
	4	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience
	5	Biological Sciences
	6	Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Services
B	7	Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences
	8	Chemistry
	9	Physics
	10	Mathematical Sciences
	11	Computer Science and Informatics
	12	Engineering
C	13	Architecture, Built Environment and Planning
	14	Geography and Environmental Studies
	15	Archaeology
	16	Economics and Econometrics
	17	Business and Management Studies
	18	Law
	19	Politics and International Studies
	20	Social Work and Social Policy
	21	Sociology
	22	Anthropology and Development Studies
	23	Education
	24	Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism
D	25	Area Studies
	26	Modern Languages and Linguistics
	27	English Language and Literature
	28	History
	29	Classics
	30	Philosophy
	31	Theology and Religious Studies
	32	Art and Design; History, Practice and Theory
	33	Music, Drama, Dance, Performing arts, Film and Screen Studies
	34	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

Annex D: FRAP evaluation and engagement activities

Commissioned work	
Understanding perceptions of the REF	Large scale review, commissioned from RAND Europe, that collected attitudes to the REF in real time as UK institutions prepared their submissions.
Responsible use of technology in research assessment	Project exploring the feasibility of using artificial intelligence strategies to predict output scores in future research assessment exercises.
Harnessing the Metric Tide	Rapid review revisiting the conclusions and recommendations of The Metric Tide (2015) and providing advice on the role of metrics in any future assessment framework.
Analysis of REF outputs	Work to explore ways to maximise the value of data generated by the REF to gain insights into the health of disciplines or research areas.
Review of REF costs and benefits	Work to identify how REF submission preparation was managed within institutions and understand how REF 2021 costs have been contained or grown compared to previous exercises. Publication: July 2023.
Impact case study analysis	Analyses of the ca. 7,000 impact case studies submitted to REF 2021 to extract common themes and messages that form evidence of the broad impact of HE research on wider society. Publication: July 2023
REF 2021 reports and internally conducted analyses	
REF 2021 panel reports	REF 2021 Main and Sub-panel reports, along with reports from the Interdisciplinary and Equality and Diversity Advisory Panels (IDAP and EDAP), reflecting on the current exercise. REF in real time as UK institutions prepared their submissions.
Institutional-level Environment Pilot Panel final report research assessment	Final report of the Institutional-level Environment Pilot Panel setting out its reflections and conclusions on assessing the research environment at whole-university level. output scores in future research assessment exercises.
EDI-related analyses	Analysis of the submission of staff, broken down by protected group and ECR status, including the spread of output attribution across groups. Publication: July 2023
Stakeholder engagement	
Roundtable discussions	A series of early roundtable discussions (held in Summer 2020) with over 200 stakeholders, advocates and experts to explore how a future assessment system can support a healthy, dynamic research system. and Equality and Diversity Advisory Panels (IDAP and EDAP), reflecting on the current exercise. REF in real time as UK institutions prepared their submissions.
REF 2021 institutional feedback Panel final report research assessment	Over 100 institutions provided feedback on REF 2021 from a strategic perspective, reflecting on its benefits and challenges. reflections and conclusions on assessing the research environment at whole-university level. output scores in future research assessment exercises.
Sector consultation	Large-scale consultation on the purposes of a future exercise, the principles that should guide its development, and the assessment criteria and processes in future exercises.