

# Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE): Early insights & next steps



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# Session plan

## **Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE):**

- What we now know
- What information we have that we can learn from
- What we will do next

## **Research Culture:**

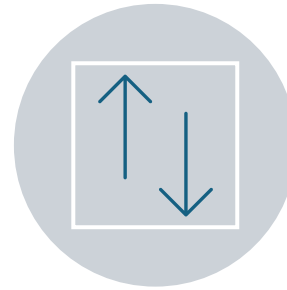
- Strategising for development
- Measuring progress

# SPRE: What we now know



People, Culture and Environment →

**Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE)**



Weighting 20%

Reduced from initial decisions, but increased from REF 2021



60% institutional level (IL)

40% unit-level (UL)

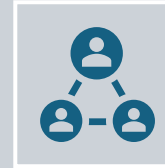


Focus on creating the conditions that enable people to conduct world-class research.

# SPRE: Content



Four sections for both IL and UL statements (very similar to REF 2021 environment)



UL has required elements on representativeness; research community; and approach to engagement and impact



'Basket' of suggested indicators to be confirmed by the panels in 2026



Quantitative data (old REF4a/b/c) to be provided, but may look different

# Sector reaction

RESEARCH FORTNIGHT 10 DEC 2025

## REF 2029: research culture metric overhauled

## REF 2029 downgrades research culture, restores five output limit

Several planned reforms to the UK's Research Excellence Framework scrapped or partially rolled back after three-month pause, bringing exercise closer to 2021 audit

Published on December 10, 2025

Last updated December 10, 2025

## The REF's environment rebrand is no climbdown

The pragmatic response to misunderstandings around the word 'culture' will ensure that grassroots momentum is not lost, says John-Arne Røttingen

Published on December 10, 2025

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OPINION 10 DEC 2025

## REF 2029 will still move the needle on research culture

By Karen Stroobants, Yolana Pringle and Elizabeth Gadd

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## Sector reaction

“Reframing [as SPRE] rightly **still places people at the centre**. The switch... is a pragmatic response and ensures that the **momentum from the grassroots movement** to improve research culture is not lost.

The use of the word “culture” itself was clearly **becoming a distraction** and was at risk of being misunderstood or politicised”



Source: AleksandarGeorgiev/Getty Images

# Implications

Institutional statement is worth 12% of each submission

Internal timelines, and resourcing, will need to evolve to reflect changes

Now have much of the detail needed for IL statements

Less detail on the UL - much left to the sub-panels

“No overlap” between IL and UL

Shortened list of indicators from the PCE pilot

As it looks like REF 2021 – can we do the same thing?

# Lessons learnt from REF 2021 – Institutional Level statement

- Needs senior leader oversight and input (PVC-R, VP, etc), along with PS
- UoAs want early sight for UL narrative development
- Several teams/ areas will need to provide input
- Time needed to properly evidence claims
- Aggregated data needed at institutional level
- Cross reference between IL and UL
- Make use of ILEPP report
- (Limited) REF 2021 institutional feedback to build from

# Lessons learnt from REF 2021 – Unit-Level statements

- Academic leadership essential but they will need PS support
- Provide checklists based on REF guidance
- Share and peer review across UoAs is vital – arrange a process for this
- Need many iterations – build into timelines
- Senior leader(s) checks and sign off – build into timelines
- UoAs will need data, and support to process this
- It is not a PR/ spin exercise – claims needs to be evidenced and credible to academic peers
- Have audit trail in mind
  - A wide range of things can be audited. Will need to be able to evidence claims at short notice (esp. important to document where high staff turnover)
- Some analysis of best practice: [What is a high-quality research environment? Evidence from the UK's research excellence framework \(Feb 2024\)](#)

# Lessons learnt from REF 2021 – Data

- Don't underestimate how long this takes!
- Work collaboratively with those who hold the data: planning, HR, academic departments etc.
  - Involved these teams early in REF preparations
- UoAs don't always map to organisational units, getting data by UoA can be additional work
  - At University's discretion which UoA to allocate (REF4) data to
- Make sure not to double count across UoAs by coordinating together (centrally organised?)
  - Make sure it all adds up in the IL statement
- Consider early on what data UoA leads will need to write their narrative.
  - Where possible, combined and streamlined requests for data across UoAs
- Have audit trail in mind

# What can we learn from the PCE pilot?

- Distance travelled should be rewarded (but maintenance is ok too)
- HEIs should show reflection and adaptation of approaches
- Articulate strategy, intent and action within your own context and resources
- Sustainability of a healthy environment is important, as is being fit for the future
- Narrative must be supported with evidence
- Larger institutions scored higher
  - Evidence was often lacking for smaller institutions and units
  - Panels were sometimes less confident in awarding higher scores
- IL and UL templates need to be integrated
  - IL statements should articulate strategy and policies
  - UL statements should explain how these are delivered

## Pilot – revised 3\* and 4\* definitions?

### **Revised 3\* descriptor:**

*There is evidence that the approach has a positive impact on research culture and as a result people achieve better results.*

### **Revised 4\* descriptor:**

*There is evidence that the institution has reflected on the approach and has sustainable plans for the future strategy development. This could include sharing of good practice, and/or learning from experiences.*

So, what are we going to do now?

# Practicalities of preparing for SPRE

- Put IL narrative team in place now and **start drafting**
  - Start with and learn from REF 2021 ILS
- Agree who we need input from, and in what iteration
  - E.g. infrastructure, researcher development, impact and engagement
- Data road mapping: what do we need, what do we have, what don't we have (incl. in the format we need)
- Develop a timeline, including internal reviews stages
- Communications to/with units
  - Even more imperative that IL statement (drafts) are provided early
  - Guidance on the required UL elements (representation, research community, approach to engagement and impact)

# Approach to collecting data

## **Institutionally lead** data collection, collation and communication

- Consider context – how do you define your research communities?
- Get in touch with the key people who hold data now to explain REF 2029 (and your timeline)
- Talk to units – get a good understanding of what they need
  - What additional information needs collecting? And from whom?
- Investigate systems can use to support institutional/ unit-level data collection and collation

# Is research culture still relevant?



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OPINION 10 DEC 2025

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*The essence of culture remains firmly embedded...*

*Many universities have already made research culture a strategic priority, independent of REF, and should continue to do so.*

***Institutions considering cutting culture-related roles or resources based on what is merely relabelling, might want to think twice.***

# Culture in SPRE guidance

SPRE guidance mentions “culture and environment” together six times, culture is also referenced separately

*“...REF 2029 assessment will consider how research and impact strategies can enable the building of excellent cultures and research environments.”*

*“Inclusive, supportive and collaborative research cultures enable a strong, diverse and dynamic research ecosystem and will **continue** to be assessed in REF 2029”*

*“The ILS and ULS assess strategies and practices that underpin excellence in research culture and the ongoing support and development of research staff [etc.]...”*

# Strategising for research culture development

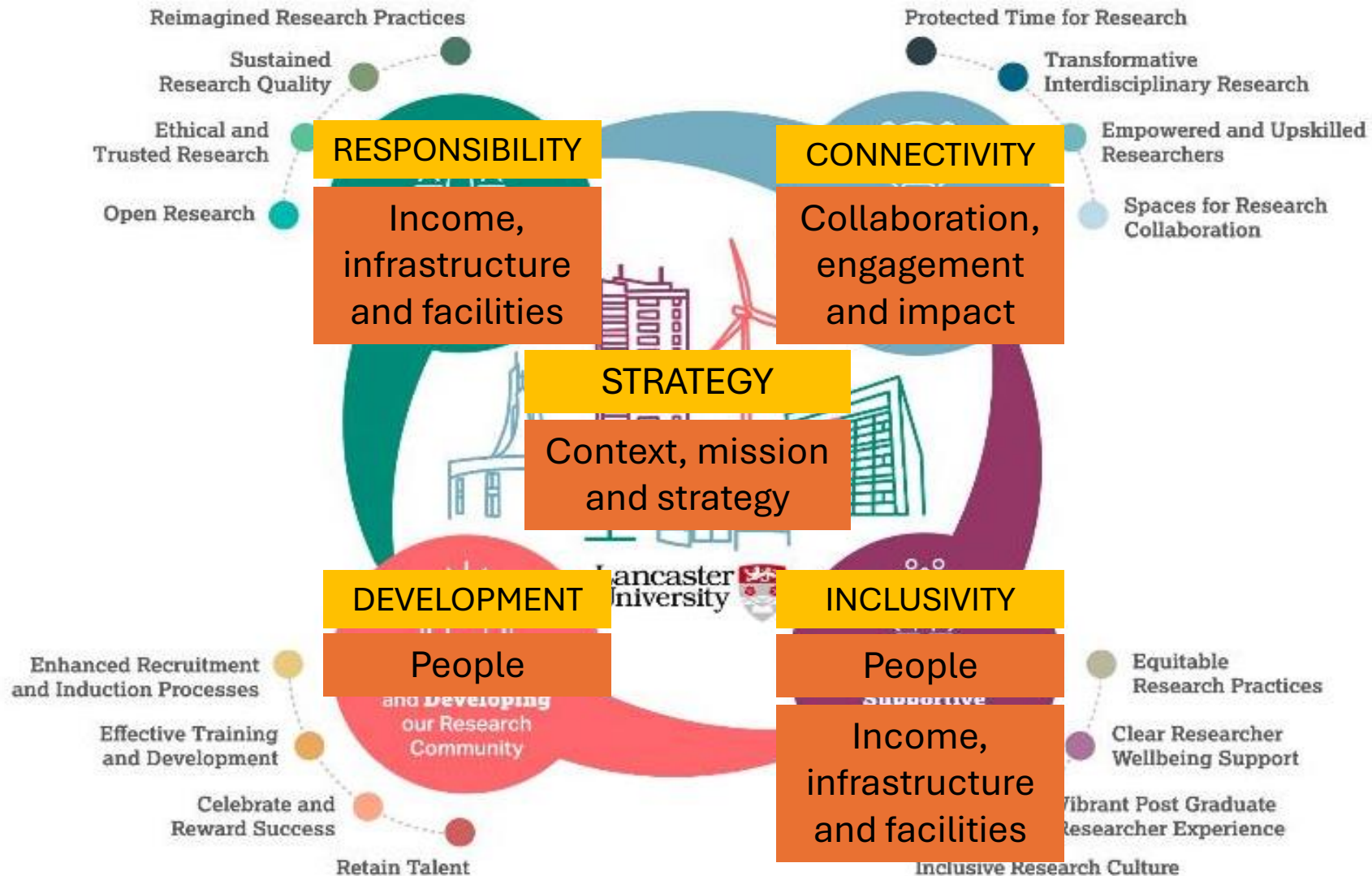
**REF is an assessment; we shouldn't let it drive our strategies** (*too much*)

- Outputs aren't written for REF submission – we want to share our research findings
- We don't create impact to write an ICS – we want our research create a difference in the world
- Therefore – we should continue to develop our own research cultures and strategies and report progress through SPRE statements

**Culture and environment strategy should be context specific:**

- To HEIs and within its organisational units
- To individuals and their different groups/communities
- To resources available, and change overtime
- Top down and bottom up

# Research-excellence Culture Action Plan (ReCAP)





Research culture and environment **at The University of Manchester**

# Lancaster Maturity Framework

- A way to:
  - measure progress against ReCAP
  - identify best practice and grass roots projects
  - recognise weaker areas for development
  - prepare for REF SPRE submission
- Piloted in person with 3 departments
- Looking at potential digital version
- Developing with N8 universities from Newcastle University template

	Effective Training and Development
Embryonic	The unit recognises the need for equitable professional and career development (across role, stage and group) but has yet to take significant action. Time to undertake these activities is not protected or supported. Awareness of mentoring opportunities and support is minimal.
Emerging	Initial steps are being taken to address under-representation and inequalities at different career stages, although these efforts are not yet systematic. There is some engagement with the research community regarding their career aspirations and development needs. There are policies and processes aimed at protecting time for career development and training but this is not systematic or strategic. Everyone is encouraged to have a mentor.
Evolving	A clear understanding of the importance of equitable career development has been established. Regular engagement with the research community is carried out to understand and support their career development goals. Most individuals have a mentor who can advise on their career development, outside of their PI or supervisor relationship. Time is actively protected within workload models for research and career development activity.
Embedded	Equitable career development is seamlessly integrated into the unit's culture. There is proactive engagement with the research community, tailored support for diverse career paths, and a strong awareness of the policies and programmes available, which are deeply embedded in the unit's operations, accompanied by continuous evaluation and improvement. Success in promoting equitable career development is evident and celebrated, reflecting a mature and sustained commitment to equity. Mentorship agreements are common and encouraged, and built in to induction and PDR processes.
Why? Examples of Practice	

# Manchester research culture tool-kit

- In development, but roll-out paused until clarity on REF guidance
- Building on maturity framework developed by Newcastle University
- To be trialled and further developed with REF PCE/ SPRE champions and School Research Directors spring 2026
- REF informed, not REF led
- To include:
  - University of Manchester 'Research Culture and Environment Framework' and case studies
  - Input from School Research Directors research culture forum
  - Reflections and best practice identified from REF 2021

## Key take aways

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Don't rush to disband research culture teams and strategies or prematurely shelve initiatives

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Start organising your ILS team and begin those drafts

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Get on top of data capture, collation and communications

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Start/continue ongoing dialogues with unit statement authors

# Questions?



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