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REF Pilot Process Guide for Universities

December 2025

Introduction

We are appreciative of universities volunteering to participate in the piloting for the Research Excellence Framework (REF Pakistan). This will give your university the opportunity to test yourselves as well as shaping the future of the REF which is intended to be introduced in Pakistan in 2026. Participation in the pilot will not in itself lead to a longer-term REF grading. The purpose is to test the design of the REF in Pakistan and help the Higher Education Commission (HEC) and the Steering Group evaluate what might need to be adjusted. It does however also give your university a 'dry run' which will enable you to make a stronger REF submission when the time comes.

What does this involve?

The pilot process runs from **12th January 2026** to 23rd February. Universities will need to complete the uploading process by **9th February**. It is anticipated that some universities will do so earlier. The reviewer process will then complete over the remaining period. Universities will receive their results in early March. HEC and the project team will evaluate the results to present at the end of March 2026

The REF Pakistan submission process requires universities to assemble a comprehensive, evidence-led portfolio demonstrating the quality, relevance, and contribution of their research. Each participating institution submits research classified into specific disciplinary categories, with sub-disciplines (specified in the Handbook). Each discipline submission is evaluated by an expert sub-panel, overseen by a main panel (A–D: life sciences, physical sciences, social sciences, arts/humanities). The university prepares a structured package consisting of research outputs, an environment narrative and up to two impact case studies for each submission. There is accompanying evidence on evidence presentation in the REF Pakistan Integrated Handbook. This provides clear guidance so that all universities provide information in a consistent and comparable manner.

It is anticipated that the final REF submission process will begin many months before the submission deadline, as institutions must identify which staff are eligible, which outputs should be submitted, and which impact cases show independently evidenced influence beyond academia. Universities will typically establish an internal Ref Pakistan steering committee to coordinate data gathering, verify evidence, and ensure that claims made in the narrative are matched by documentary support. Drafts of the outputs, environment statement, and impact case studies can then be reviewed internally before final submission to refine clarity, accuracy, and alignment with the star-level descriptors in the Ref Pakistan Integrated Handbook.

For the pilot this will be a much-shortened process but universities will need to designate a REF Pakistan Coordinator, who is familiar with data management, so most likely to be an existing ORIC or QEC co-ordinator. They will need to coordinate with colleagues to put together the qualitative evidence, the research impact, the case study etc. We refer to this as the support team. A vice chancellor or pro-vice chancellor may want to be nominal lead. HEC expect universities to choose the approach that best matches current internal processes.

Submission

Full guidance on the submission process is in the REF Pakistan Integrated Handbook. Once the pilot submission is finalised, it should be uploaded to the REF Pakistan pilot portal where it is checked for completeness and compliance. Further details on the portal and upload process will be delivered in due course. The institution then awaits the external assessment undertaken by independent reviewers. During this time, universities may be contacted to provide clarifications or supplementary evidence if required for audit or verification. After the review process concludes and scores are moderated, the institution receives its ratings for Outputs, Environment, and Impact. Clear documentation and evidence underpin the entire process, ensuring transparency, fairness, and credibility across all participating universities. In the final REF those results contribute to national benchmarks, funding decisions, and strategic analysis. For the pilot there will be an evaluation on the submission process, and universities will help shape any changes required.

A staged approach

Universities must carefully select and justify the evidence underpinning each element of their REF Pakistan submission, drawing on both quantitative and qualitative sources. We are suggesting a staged approach.

Quantitative evidence may include citation data (where relevant), usage metrics, policy adoption figures, economic indicators, health or justice outcomes, or participation numbers demonstrating reach. Qualitative evidence, by contrast, often takes the form of policy documents, independent testimonials, legislative references, implementation records, media coverage, professional guidelines, or corroborating statements from external beneficiaries. A robust REF Pakistan submission will involve triangulation of both types of evidence to demonstrate not only that change occurred, but that the university's research was a material and verifiable driver of that change. Institutions therefore invest some time in obtaining third-party documentation, securing permissions, and ensuring that the evidence meets REF Pakistan's standards of independence, credibility, and traceability.

Deciding which impact case studies to submit is a major strategic task and varies depending on the size and disciplinary profile of each university so this may need to be started as early as possible. Institutions are permitted to submit up to two case studies per submission, with the number linked to headcount or institutional size thresholds set out in the REF Pakistan guidance. This restriction means universities must prioritise cases with the strongest, clearest, and most independently corroborated impact, supported by evidence that survives audit scrutiny. In the longer-term process universities may want to undertake multiple review cycles, assessing potential cases against star descriptors, evidence strength, degree of external influence, and alignment with national priorities. Only cases demonstrating sustained, significant, and well-evidenced impact then proceed to final submission. This internal calibration process can ensure that institutions present their most compelling examples of societal, economic, cultural, or policy impact and maximise their performance within the national review framework. For the pilot a more pragmatic approach may be required.

| Category | Required? | Submitted As |
|---|-------------|----------------------------------|
| Output Context Summary | ✓ | Word/PDF (≈150 words per output) |
| Impact Case Study | ✓ | Word/PDF (1,500–2,000 words) |
| Environment Statement | ✓ | Word/PDF + data tables |
| Inclusivity Plan (not required for pilot) | | Annex (PDF) |
| Responsible Metrics Annex | ✓ | Annex (PDF/XLS) |
| Authorship/Contribution Statement | Conditional | Upload per output |
| Reproducible Data / Code | Conditional | Dataset link or file |
| Peer Validation Evidence | Optional | PDF letters / citations |
| ORIC Self-Assessment Data | Recommended | XLS/PDF |
| EDI / Ethics Evidence | Integrated | Within templates |

Evidence Overview

Refer to handbook for full evidence requirements. NB. The Inclusivity Plan is not required for the pilot as more work is required to define inclusivity for REF Pakistan.

University Submission Process: Full Step-by-Step

STAGE 0 — INITIAL PREPARATION

0.1 Interpret REF PAKISTAN Guidelines

Universities review:

- Handbook
- Document bundles for Outputs, Environment, Impact
- Evidence standards
- Eligibility criteria for staff and outputs

Purpose:

Ensure institutional understanding of expectations and compliance requirements.

0.2 Establish Institutional REF Pakistan Steering Group and support team

Includes:

- Appointed REF Pakistan Coordinator
- REF Pakistan academic lead
- Data/evidence officers
- Departmental coordinators
- Impact officers
- Administrative support

Purpose:

Centralise decision-making and workflow control.

STAGE 1 — IDENTIFY ELIGIBLE STAFF & OUTPUTS

1.1 Staff Identification

Institution compiles list of eligible academic staff based on national REF Pakistan definitions.

1.2 Output Mapping

Each department nominates:

- High-quality research outputs
- Outputs with the strongest evidence of contribution and rigour
- Supporting evidence (datasets, ethics, citations, peer review info)

Purpose:

Prepare a balanced, evidence-supported portfolio

STAGE 2 — IMPACT CASE STUDY DEVELOPMENT

2.1 Select Impact Cases

Choose cases with:

- Clear causal pathways
- Independently verifiable influence
- Strong stakeholder documentation

2.2 Collect Evidence

May include:

- Policy adoption documents
- Stakeholder letters
- Data on changes achieved
- Media coverage
- Programme evaluations

2.3 Draft and Refine Impact Narrative

Ensure:

- Clear outcome, not just activity
- Robust evidence chain
- Alignment to Annex 1 descriptors for reach and significance

STAGE 3 — ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT PREPARATION

3.1 Draft Environment Narrative

Must include:

- Strategy & governance
- Research culture
- Doctoral training
- Infrastructure
- Funding and grants
- KPIs and performance data

3.2 Evidence Assembly

- Organisational charts
- Policy documents

- Training logs
- Performance statistics

STAGE 4 — INTERNAL REVIEW & QUALITY ASSURANCE

4.1 Internal Peer Review

Multi-level review:

- Faculty committees
- University research office
- Impact and environment specialists

4.2 Evidence Verification

Check:

- Accuracy
- Authenticity
- Dates
- Independence
- Match to narrative claims

4.3 Final Adjustments

Refine narratives to:

- Match Annex 1 descriptors
- Remove overstated claims
- Strengthen evidence links

STAGE 5 — SUBMISSION TO REF PAKISTAN

5.1 Upload to Portal

University uploads:

- Outputs
- Impact case studies
- Environment statement
- All documentary evidence
- Staff and output metadata

5.2 Compliance Checks

System verifies:

- Completeness

- File naming
- Formatting
- Missing evidence

University may amend before deadline.

■ STAGE 6 — POST-SUBMISSION CLARIFICATION PERIOD

REF PAKISTAN Secretariat may request:

- Additional evidence
- Clarification on methodologies
- Verification of impact claims
- Confirmation of dates or personnel

Universities must respond promptly.

■ STAGE 7 — RESULTS AND LEARNING

7.1 Receive Scores

Institution receives:

- Output rating
- Environment rating
- Impact rating
- Panel feedback

7.2 Strategic Review

University analyses:

- Performance gaps
- Comparative position
- Strengths/weaknesses

7.3 Institutional Learning

Used to refine:

- Future research strategy
- Impact generation processes
- Research culture planning
- Readiness for REF Submission post launch

Stage 0 – Initial Preparation

Set up REF governance and planning.

Stage 1 – Identify Staff & Outputs

Identify eligible staff and shortlist outputs.

Stage 2 – Impact Case Development

Select impact cases and gather evidence.

Stage 3 – Environment Statement

Write narrative on research environment.

Stage 4 – Internal Review & QA

Conduct reviews and verify evidence.

Stage 5 – Submission to REF

Upload all documents to the portal.

Stage 6 – Clarifications

Respond to audit and evidence requests.

Stage 7 – Results & Learning

Receive ratings and analyse outcomes.

