

# REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

## Section 1 – Overview

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This policy is the latest version and any changes are listed in the [change log](#). To keep up to date on changes made to the guidance please subscribe to the [REF mailing list](#).

In this guidance we have highlighted areas where detailed guidance will be added at a later date. *These areas are shown in bold and italics and we have also made it clear in the text.*

We strive to make our website easy to use and navigate. If you have any feedback on the website design, the new format of the REF guidance, or ideas on how to improve navigation, please [email us](#). For other queries please see the [Contact page](#) for details of how to get in touch.

### 1. Introduction

- 1.0.1. Welcome to the guidance for the 2029 Research Excellence Framework (REF). This guidance provides detailed information on the assessment framework for REF 2029 and on preparing submissions.
- 1.0.2. For REF 2029, we are taking a modular approach to publishing guidance. Instead of releasing one large guidance document, we will publish sections on the website as they are developed. The [REF timetable](#) has details of key dates and upcoming new policy releases.
- 1.0.3. Every effort will be made to minimise changes to the published guidance modules. Changes made post publication will be clearly indicated in each section of the guidance. To keep up to date on changes made to the guidance please [subscribe to the REF mailing list](#). Published information that is planned to be updated is clearly highlighted in bold and italics. *Here*

*is a sample of what that looks like*. Where a whole section is planned to be updated we have flagged that at the beginning of the section to avoid publishing an entire section in italics.

1.0.4. In the guidance you will find essential information on:

- background and framework for REF 2029
- policies and best practices for preparing submissions
- instructions on how to submit to the exercise
- guidelines on how submissions will be assessed
- information on how submissions will be audited

1.0.5. You can access the full list of guidance from the [Guidance](#) link at the top of the REF website. The Guidance page shows a full list of the different sections of policy and its contents. You can click on any heading to jump to that section of the guidance/policy.

## 2. Overview of the assessment framework

2.0.1. The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the excellence of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs). It was first conducted in 2014 and again in 2021, replacing the previous Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). The next REF will complete in 2029.

2.0.2. The REF is run by a REF team managed by Research England on behalf of the UK's four higher education (HE) funding bodies (hereafter, 'the funding bodies'): Research England, the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Medr – the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, and the Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland (DfE NI). REF 2029 is governed by the [REF 2029 Steering Group](#) which comprises members of each of the funding bodies. The exercise is managed by the UK REF team, which is overseen by the REF Steering Group, consisting of representatives of the funding bodies, and based at Research England.

2.0.3. The REF is a major policy instrument for driving research excellence across the UK. The funding bodies' shared aim for the REF is to secure a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within UK higher education.

2.0.4. The objectives of REF are to:

- 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
- provide insights into the health of research in HEIs in the UK

2.0.5. The REF is a process of expert review, in which institutions are invited to make submissions into **Units of Assessment** (UoAs). These submissions are assessed by expert sub-panels for each UoA, with guidance from four main panels, each overseeing specific disciplinary areas. In addition to these main panels, the assessment process is supported by two advisory panels: the People and Diversity Advisory Panel (PDAP) and the Research Diversity Advisory Panel (RDAP). These panels provide expert guidance on promoting diversity of research and people within the UK research system.

## 3. Development of REF 2029

3.0.1. The design of REF 2029 has been shaped by a review of the UK's national research assessment system, undertaken by the funding bodies. In December 2020, a Programme Board of senior representatives from UK funding bodies was formed to oversee this programme, which was later named the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP).

3.0.2. FRAP aimed to identify approaches to research assessment which encourage and strengthen the emphasis on delivering excellent research and impact, support a positive and productive research culture, and reduce administrative burdens. Launched in 2021, FRAP adopted a collaborative approach with the sector, engaging in extensive consultation and evaluation to explore and develop approaches to research assessment. An International Advisory Group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman, played a key role in guiding and challenging the Programme Board's decisions, providing international perspectives on responsible research assessment, as outlined in the **International Advisory Group's 2023 report**.

3.0.3. FRAP also drew on the broader context of UK research policy, including the **Research and Development People and Culture Strategy (2021)** and the **Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy (2022)**. The **FRAP findings, recommendations and issues for further consultation for REF 2029** are available via our website.

## 4. Key changes for REF 2029

### 4.1. Reshaped assessment elements

4.1.1. To support a broader assessment of excellence in REF 2029, the funding bodies have reshaped and rebalanced the three core assessment elements of the REF to include a broader range of research and impact-enabling activities.

- **Strategy, people and research environment (20% weighting)** – replaces the environment element and includes an increased emphasis on research environment.
- **Contribution to knowledge and understanding (55% weighting)** – replaces the outputs element. It will be based on assessment of research outputs.
- **Engagement and impact (25% weighting)** – replaces the impact element. It will consist of impact case studies.

## 4.2. Focusing on strategy, people and research environment

4.2.1. The funding bodies will expand the **Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE)** element for REF 2029, reflecting a global shift that recognises research environment as crucial in supporting high quality research with impact. A pilot of this approach was conducted in collaboration with the sector to refine the methodology before wider implementation.

## 4.3. Shifting focus to institutions

4.3.1. REF 2029 will continue to break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions, moving away from assessing individuals and towards assessing institutions, disciplinary groupings and teams. The volume measure will now be based on an average calculated using HESA Staff record data, rather than a REF staff census date.

## 4.4. Reducing burden

4.4.1. The minimum requirement has been adjusted to one impact case study for units with fewer than 9.99 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff. Additionally, the boundaries for other units will be revised to reduce the burden across the board. The requirement for impact to be based on research of minimum 2\* quality will be removed. This change is designed to reduce the effort needed to demonstrate research quality in REF terms, broadening the range of impacts that can be submitted.

- 4.4.2. Full details of the changes to REF for 2029 can be found in the [Initial Decisions document](#) and [Update on the Initial Decisions](#).

## 5. Aims and objectives for REF 2029

- 5.0.1. The aims of REF 2029 are to create a research system which:
- **Delivers high-quality, rigorous research:** REF 2029 aims to ensure that research outputs are not only high quality, but also open to all.
  - **Fosters inclusivity and collaboration:** This REF emphasises an inclusive, diverse and collaborative research system, which supports a wide range of ideas, institutions, research methodologies, outputs, and activities.
  - **Drives an engaged and impactful research system:** REF 2029 will foster the connection between research and societal impact, seeking to encourage high quality research with tangible benefits for society and the economy.
- 5.0.2. The funding bodies have identified three objectives for REF 2029 to meet this ambition:
- **Inform the allocation of block-grant research funding:** REF continues to serve as a key tool for distributing around £2 billion annually to HEIs, based on research quality.
  - **Provide accountability for public investment in research:** REF ensures transparency and accountability for public research funding, providing evidence of the benefits of this investment to the UK economy and society. It also offers a means to track the impact and outcomes of this public funding.
  - **Provide insight into the health of research in HEIs:** By capturing a wide range of research activities across institutions, REF 2029 will offer insights into the state of UK research. It will expand beyond the previous exercise to provide benchmarking information to maximise the value of the rich evidence base provided by the REF.

## 6. Guiding principles

- 6.0.1. The funding bodies have established guiding principles that will guide and shape the delivery of REF 2029. These principles underpin the framework, acting as unifying principles that consistently influence every stage of the process. They ensure that REF 2029 remains rooted in equity, equality,

diversity and inclusion, and transparency. By following these principles, REF 2029 will support the funding bodies' expanded vision for research excellence for this exercise.

## 6.1. Equality, diversity and inclusion

6.1.1. The REF aims to support a research system that not only produces excellent research but also fosters an inclusive and diverse environment. This REF includes several measures to support greater equality, diversity, and inclusion, 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 learning from the previous exercise.
- The introduction of a new **People and Diversity Advisory Panel** (PDAP), which builds on the previous Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel and will be further embedded into criteria-setting and assessment processes.

## 6.2. Equity

6.2.1. The REF encourages diversity in research, recognising all types of research and forms of output, including interdisciplinary and collaborative work. Panels are instructed to define equitable criteria that recognise excellence in all types of research, including applied, practice-based, basic, and strategic research. This will be supported by the introduction of a new **Research Diversity Advisory Panel** (RDAP), which builds on the previous Interdisciplinary Diversity Advisory Panel, embedded into criteria-setting and assessment processes.

## 6.3. Transparency

6.3.1. This REF continues its commitment to transparency to reinforce the credibility of the assessment process and outcomes. The criteria and procedures that will be applied in the assessment will be published well in advance of institutions making their submissions. Overall and sub-profile outcomes will also be published, with explanations of decision-making processes at main and sub-panel levels.

## 7. Sector priorities

- 7.0.1. The detailed design of the REF 2029 is underway; 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 identified were:
- robustness of assessment outcomes
  - impact of the system on research culture
  - ensuring that the bureaucratic burden of the system is proportionate
- 7.0.2. Taking their steer from the extensive engagement and consultation undertaken by the FRAP, the funding bodies have strived to ensure that the design of REF 2029 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.
- 7.0.3. **Further policy development:** building on the FRAP findings, the next phase of policy development for REF 2029 will be shaped through ongoing engagement and consultation with the sector, ensuring a collaborative and inclusive approach. Policy for REF 2029 will be published in modules, providing a new, more accessible framework to support sector planning and encourage engagement with the development process.

## 8. Assessment process

- 8.0.1. The REF is a process of expert review, in which institutions are invited to make submissions into **Units of Assessment** (UoAs). Submissions are assessed by an expert sub-panel for each UoA, working under the guidance of four main panels.
- 8.0.2. The main panels provide leadership and guidance to a group of sub-panels. They oversee the assessment, ensuring the assessment criteria and standards are consistently applied. The four main panels are:
- Main panel A: Medicine, Health and Life Sciences
  - Main panel B: Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics
  - Main panel C: Social Sciences
  - Main panel D: Arts and Humanities

8.0.3. The assessment panels are supported by two advisory panels, the **People and Diversity Panel** (PDAP) and the **Research Diversity Advisory Panel** (RDAP), who provide expert guidance on their respective areas. The advisory panels support the funding bodies' aim to encourage diversity of research and people in the UK research system.

8.0.4. PDAP will develop strategies to:

- support recognition of a diversity of roles, careers and career stages within REF 2029 development, delivery, and assessment
- advance equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) throughout REF 2029

8.0.5. RDAP will develop strategies to:

- support the equitable recognition of diverse forms of research throughout REF 2029 including interdisciplinary research, building on the work of the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel in the previous exercise

## 9. Structure of submissions

9.0.1. Submissions to the REF are made in **34 Units of Assessment**, (UoAs). For REF 2029 there are 34 sub-panels, one for each UoA. HEIs are required to make submissions in each of the disciplinary areas (UoAs) where they have contracts that contribute to the volume measure. Further information on the allocation of contracts to UoAs can be found in **Section 3, Volume Measure guidance**. As with REF 2021, there will be a small unit exception process. More information on this process will follow in the Submissions section of the guidance.

9.0.2. The submission elements consist of the following components.

### 9.1. Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE)

9.1.1. 20% of the overall assessment score

9.1.2. An institution level evidence statement on strategy, people and research environment.

9.1.3. A unit level evidence statement on strategy, people and research environment.

### 9.2. Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)

9.2.1. 55% of the overall assessment score.

9.2.2. Research outputs.

### **9.3. Engagement and Impact (E&I)**

9.3.1. 25% of the overall assessment score

9.3.2. Impact case studies

### **9.4. Panels and sub-panels**

9.4.1. In each of the 34 UoAs, expert sub-panels conduct a detailed assessment of submissions. Each sub-panel works under the guidance and leadership of one of four main panels. The four main panels develop the panel criteria and working methods, ensuring compliance with published procedures, apply assessment standards consistently, and approving the assessment outcomes.

9.4.2. Sub-panels assess submissions following a common set of procedures and working methods in undertaking aspects of their work (for example, in managing conflicts of interest). The main panels work together to establish shared 'Panel Criteria,' outlining how they will apply the generic assessment criteria and defining the working methods for both the main and sub-panels in carrying out their responsibilities. The criteria account for disciplinary differences in the nature of the research conducted. The panel criteria and working methods will be published in due course.

9.4.3. All submissions are assessed using a quality rating system. For REF 2029 the funding bodies will invite the expert panels to review the quality rating system to ensure it accurately reflects an expanded understanding of excellence. The panel criteria and guidance will set out the quality rating system.

9.4.4. For each submission, the sub-panels will develop a 'sub-profile' for each of the three elements of assessment. The sub-profiles show the proportions of activity against the quality rating system. The three sub-profiles will be combined into an overall quality profile.

## **10. REF outcomes**

- 10.0.1. The overall quality profile awarded to each submission is the primary outcome of the REF. Alongside the quality profile, the funding bodies also publish further detail relating to the assessment outcomes.
- 10.0.2. Further details on the assessment process will be released over the course of the exercise.

## 11. Eligibility to participate in REF 2029

- 11.0.1. For the purposes of the REF, an HEI is defined as follows:
- In Wales, the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 provides that HEFCW may only provide funding to the governing body of Higher Education Institutions, defined as “a university, an institution conducted by a higher education corporation or a designated institution” (see sections 65-66). In due course, this definition will be replaced by the definition of ‘specified provider’ under section 105 of the Tertiary Education and Research (Wales) Act (2022). The Commission for Tertiary Education and Research (Registration and De-registration of Tertiary Education Providers in Wales) Regulations 2024 define “specified provider” as a “registered provider registered in the higher education core category”.
  - In Northern Ireland, as defined in The Education and Libraries (NI) Order 1993 “higher education institutions” eligible to receive grants from the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland are defined as “a university, a college of education and any other institution which provides higher education courses and is designated by regulations as a Higher Education Institution”.
  - In Scotland, “fundable bodies” are those listed in Schedule 2 of the Further and Higher Education (Scotland) Act 2005 (as amended), “as: (1) Institutions formerly eligible for funding by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council or as (2) Other institutions”.
  - In England section 97 of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017) provides that Research England may only provide funding to the governing body of an “eligible higher education provider”. Regulation 5 of the Higher Education (Transparency Condition and Financial Support) (England) Regulations 2018 defines “eligible higher education providers” as those Higher Education Providers registered in the “approved (fee cap)” category of the OfS register.
  - Institutions wishing to participate in REF 2029 that do not meet these criteria should contact [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) for further clarification.

- 11.0.2. The funding bodies expect all HEIs (in all UK countries) submitting to the REF to have research degree provision defined in accordance with the HESA definition of a research-based higher degree. This includes institutions with validation, sub-contractual or franchise arrangements with other HEIs. Institutions wishing to participate in the exercise will also be required to meet the submission requirements that are set out in this guidance document.
- 11.0.3. Where an HEI does not have research degree provision but is implementing a research strategy that can demonstrate appropriate development and an increasing focus on research, the institution may contact the relevant funding body to request permission to participate. Such institutions should contact the relevant funding body to discuss this matter as soon as possible, and before 30 June 2027. Requests will be considered in relation to the research profile of the institution, including any participation in previous RAEs or REF exercises, and its future research strategy.
- 11.0.4. For detailed information, please refer to the relevant funding body terms and conditions of funding.

## 12. Equalities legislation

- 12.0.1. Equality, diversity and inclusion are a priority in REF 2029. The funding bodies and REF 2029 recognise the critical role that inclusive representation plays in ensuring that the REF assessment process reflects the breadth and vitality of UK research.
- 12.0.2. The public sector equality duty (section 149 of the Equality Act 2010) came into force in April 2011. Under the public sector equality duty, the higher education (HE) funding bodies and HEIs in England, Scotland and Wales, in carrying out their functions, must have due regard to the need to:
- eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under the Act
  - advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it
  - foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it. (In this context a 'relevant' protected characteristic is one other than marriage and civil partnership)

- 12.0.3. There are specific duties in force for England, Scotland and Wales, to meet the public sector equality duty: in England, the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties and Public Authorities) Regulations 2017; in Scotland, the Equality Act 2010 (Specific Duties) (Scotland) Regulations 2012, and Amendment Regulations 2015 and 2016; in Wales, the Equality Act 2010 (Statutory Duties) (Wales) Regulations 2011.
- 12.0.4. The scope of equality legislation in Northern Ireland is similar to the Equality Act 2010. In addition, it is unlawful to discriminate against people on the grounds of political opinion. Section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 also places a statutory obligation on the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland and HEIs in Northern Ireland in carrying out their public functions to have due regard to the need to promote equality of opportunity:
- between persons of different religious belief, political opinion, racial group, age, marital status or sexual orientation
  - between men and women generally
  - between persons with a disability and persons without
  - between persons with dependents and persons without
- 12.0.5. **Funding bodies' legal responsibilities:** in order to ensure compliance with the public sector equality duty, and section 75 of the Northern Ireland Act, the HE funding bodies need to consider and understand the impact of their policies on equality. The funding bodies have considered the equality impact of previous exercises in the development of the REF, and equality considerations have been embedded into all relevant elements of the REF.
- 12.0.6. **HEIs' legal responsibilities:** while the funding bodies' aim is to eliminate any incentives towards discriminatory practices by HEIs in the REF 2029 process, HEIs also have the responsibility as employers and public bodies to discharge the Public Sector Equality Duty and ensure that they avoid engaging in discriminatory practices.

## 13. Timetable for REF 2029

- 13.0.1. This **timetable** represents the current project plan for REF 2029 and it will be updated as the exercise progresses.

## 14. Change log

14.0.1. This policy is the latest version and any changes are listed in the **change log**.