

REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

Section 7 – Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE) guidance

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All REF 2029 guidance will be formally finalised in 2026 and therefore guidance modules may be subject to small revisions in the interim.

Changes made to published guidance will be clearly indicated in a change log. To keep up to date on changes made to the guidance, please subscribe to the [REF mailing list](#).

Some elements of this guidance will be further developed by panels. *These areas are shown in bold and italics and we have also made it clear in the text.*

1. Overview

- 1.0.1. This guidance section outlines the scope and content of the Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) statements at institution level and unit level. These statements replace the Environment statements (REF 5a and 5b) from REF 2021 and have been informed by the [People, Culture and Environment \(PCE\) pilot](#).
- 1.0.2. This section provides guidance on the expectations for this element in REF 2029. The guidance covers:
 - key changes to the research environment assessment from REF 2021
 - approaches to quantitative data
 - the approach to assessment at institution and unit level
 - unit level statements on representation and the research community
- 1.0.3. The templates and indicators will be confirmed with panels and published as soon as possible in 2026.

2. Introduction

- 2.0.1. As part of the **Initial Decisions**, the funding bodies announced their intention to increase focus on the assessment of the conditions that are an essential feature of research excellence, through the submission of disciplinary and institutional statements relating to research culture and environment.
- 2.0.2. Following the conclusion of the **PCE pilot**, this element has been renamed Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE). The funding bodies recognise that strategies are the active way institutions respond to their potentially challenging operating contexts and REF 2029 assessment will consider how research and impact strategies can enable the building of excellent cultures and research environments. The emphasis on strategy also reflects the introduction of the institution-level statement (ILS) as an assessed element with a focus on institutional research and impact strategy.
- 2.0.3. REF 2029 seeks to value all people who undertake, enable or support research, engagement and impact. Inclusive, supportive and collaborative research cultures enable a strong, diverse and dynamic research ecosystem and will continue to be assessed in REF 2029, building on the criteria of 'vitality' used in REF 2021.
- 2.0.4. The SPRE element operates within, and fully respects, institutions' existing legal duties and sector commitments relating to academic freedom and freedom of speech, including the differing statutory or legal protections that apply across the four nations, without altering or expanding those duties, while supporting environments that enable a diversity of scholarly perspectives.

2.1. PCE pilot outcomes

- 2.1.1. The funding bodies commissioned the PCE Indicators Project, led by Technopolis and CRAC-Vitae in collaboration with a number of sector organisations. The project developed a list of indicators which could be used to assess PCE. The PCE pilot trialled these co-developed indicators across a representative range of institutions and units of assessment (UoA), to inform the development of robust, inclusive and meaningful approaches to considering the research culture and environment as the underpinning basis of excellence in the research system. The **PCE pilot report** has now been published.

- 2.1.2. To minimise change for this exercise, it has been decided to evolve the environment statement template from REF 2021 for both institution and unit-level statements. The learning from the PCE pilot and the feedback from participating institutions has been used to shape this guidance and to propose indicators to support the narrative statements. A list of indicators which were considered useful to the pilot assessment, and which are applicable across a range of institutions and disciplines, is provided in the pilot report. A basket of suggested indicators will be confirmed with the panels and published as soon as possible in 2026.

3. Key changes in REF 2029

3.1. SPRE statements and weighting

- 3.1.1. SPRE will be assessed at both institution level (IL) and unit level (UL). The two statements will be assessed separately. Both statements will comprise the four sections equivalent to the UL environment statement from REF 2021, namely: context, mission and strategy; people; income, infrastructure and facilities and collaboration, engagement and impact.
- 3.1.2. Following the completion of the PCE pilot exercise and engagement with the sector, the funding bodies have concluded that the SPRE element will make up 20% of the overall unit quality profile. The SPRE element will consist of an institution-level statement (ILS, weighting 60% of the SPRE score) and a unit-level statement (ULS, 40%). This weighting reflects the responsibility institutions have to support and resource positive research cultures and environments within units and reduces the burden for submitting units.

3.2. Changes to institution-level statements (ILS)

- 3.2.1. The piloting of an ILS in REF 2021 demonstrated the value of a statement for context in assessing the UL environment statement. For REF 2029, the ILS has evolved to be a key part of the assessment, capturing and assessing strategies and processes at IL.
- 3.2.2. The ILS will require narrative for each of the four sections, but the word count will be flexible across the four sections.
- 3.2.3. The approach to assessment of the ILS will be fully developed during the criteria phase.

3.3. Changes to unit-level statements (ULS)

- 3.3.1. The ULS will require narrative for each of the four sections but will have more flexibility in the choice of content. The word count will be flexible across the four sections.
- 3.3.2. The ULS also has three required elements, the statement of representation, the statement on the research community and details of the approach to Engagement and Impact. These will be incorporated into the context, mission and strategy and engagement and impact sections of the template.
- 3.3.3. Due to the introduction of the ILS as an assessed element, and to limit burden on individual units, we anticipate the ULS word limit will be less than that for the ILS and less than in REF 2021.
- 3.3.4. For institutions only submitting to one unit, please refer to the **suggested approach for small institutions**.

3.4. Statement on the research community

- 3.4.1. With the decoupling of the volume measure from submitted outputs, the definition of a submitting unit has broadened from REF 2021 to reflect the full research community.
- 3.4.2. To recognise this broader research community, the ULS will include a Research Community: Roles and Careers statement. This statement should provide an overview of the range of roles, functions, and career stages that contribute to a unit across the REF period. Units are encouraged to celebrate the breadth of research activity, roles, and contributions that support research excellence.

3.5. Statement of Representation (SoR)

- 3.5.1. To mitigate the potential for full decoupling to lead to the under-representation of research areas, research practices and research groups, a statement outlining the research diversity of the unit is required. Full details of the statement can be found in the **Contributions to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU) guidance, sub-section 7**.
- 3.5.2. The SoR should indicate how the unit's submitted research represents the research activity, topics, methods and practices of the unit, however broad or specialised the unit may be. Justification for how submitted outputs and

associated reserve lists represent the subject range and diversity of research activities undertaken by the unit during the REF 2029 cycle is required.

3.6. Indicators

- 3.6.1. The PCE pilot trialled a number of indicators and recommended the most useful and relevant. Following feedback from the PCE pilot, and discussion with the panels, a basket of options will be outlined which can be selected dependent on IL or UL relevance and/or availability of data. Panels will still use a consistent set of quantitative data to inform the assessment as was done in REF 2021. *Appropriate indicators for each element of the ILS and ULS will be discussed by panels in the criteria-setting phase and added to this guidance.*

3.7. Introduction of expanded opportunities for demonstrating excellence

- 3.7.1. The PCE pilot evaluated the use of 'rigour', conceptualised as reflection on practice or continuous improvement, as a criterion. Panels valued narratives that showed a reflective approach to development and indicated the journey travelled but recognised that, although these approaches to improvement are valuable, they are not straightforward to measure robustly.
- 3.7.2. Accordingly, the SPRE assessment will not incorporate a third criterion related to rigour or reflection. However, where institutions or units are able to demonstrate that reflective practice and continuous improvement have been effective, this will be valued in the assessment.

4. Quantitative data

- 4.0.1. As with REF 2021, the REF sub-panels will be provided with quantitative data (in REF 2021 this was called REF4a/b/c) and a standard analysis of that quantitative data, in respect of each submission in that UoA, and aggregated for all submissions in that UoA. Equivalent IL data and an aggregate of the data across submitting institutions will be provided for IL assessment.
- 4.0.2. The Panel criteria will indicate how the data will be used in informing the assessment of SPRE.

- 4.0.3. Some of the standard analyses will be different in form in REF 2029 due to the **expanded definition of the submitting unit** but we aim to enable continuity regarding the context these data sources will provide. *The data that can provide the best context for assessment in a decoupled framework will be discussed by panels and updated for the IL and UL data lists in this section.*
- 4.0.4. It is recognised that previously, creating precise data on income and doctoral students for units has been burdensome for HEIs. Therefore, for REF 2029, the level of precision required for this data will be discussed with panels and the sector in the criteria setting phase, to consider if efficiencies of process can be achieved.
- 4.0.5. *The outcome of these panel decisions and the resulting process will be published with the Panel criteria and working methods and linked here.*
- 4.0.6. If no efficiencies are deemed to be achievable whilst retaining meaningful context, the process for allocating this data to UoAs will follow the process in the **guidance for submissions for REF 2021 Part 3 Section 4: Environment data (REF4a/b/c).**
- 4.0.7. Reports from REF 2021 indicated that the REF 4c data on income-in-kind was not of sufficient quality to be useful. We will consult with panels on whether to continue this data stream.

4.1. Institution-level quantitative data

- 4.1.1. We anticipate individual and aggregated institution-level data will include:
- which units are submitted in each main panel
 - volume measure for each submitted unit
 - the units with small unit exceptions and their volume measure
 - number of research doctoral degrees awarded by UoA and total for the institution, for the REF period, by year
 - average annual research income for the REF period, total across all sources
 - average annual research income for the REF period by source

4.2. Unit-level quantitative data

- 4.2.1. We anticipate individual and aggregated unit-level data provided to sub-panels will include:

- volume measure
- total number of ACEMPFUN.02 and 03 contracts over the volume measure qualifying years and the percentage with a REFQUALCON flag
- total number of outputs submitted
- number and percentage of substantive links, for the submitted outputs and the associated reserve pool, with one, two, three, four, five or more research outputs attributed to them
- number and percentage of outputs also submitted to one, two or more other UoAs
- distribution of outputs and substantive links per sub-discipline within the UoA as defined by the REF taxonomy
- number and percentage of substantive links that are prepublication, from previous staff and those using the long-form and/or extended process exception
- number and percentage of substantive links that are volume contributing within the volume measure period
- number of research doctoral degrees awarded in the REF period, by year
- average annual research income for the REF period, total across all sources
- average annual research income for the REF period by source

5. Institution and unit-level statements

5.0.1. The ILS and ULS assess strategies and practices that underpin excellence in:

- research culture and the ongoing support and development of research staff, staff who enable or support research, engagement and impact, and research students
- research environment and the commitment to infrastructure and processes that enable and recognise the diversity of research, engagement and impact within the institution or unit
- collaboration and the processes that champion responsible research, engagement and impact within the unit, institution, and the wider community

5.0.2. Each statement will be assessed holistically. Where relevant data has been discussed once in a statement, it need not be repeated elsewhere.

- 5.0.3. Each institution and each unit should submit a SPRE statement and address each section of the template. Not all sections (or sub-sections) need to be the same length, and statements can be appropriately tailored, utilising the available indicators, to the strengths of the institution or unit.
- 5.0.4. We encourage using appropriate qualitative and quantitative indicators to provide strength to the narrative, including indicators of outcomes where available. Indicators found most useful and relevant in the PCE pilot will be suggested for each of the sections and institutions, and units may pick quantitative or qualitative indicators that most appropriately support their narrative.
- 5.0.5. In all cases, indicators should only be used to support the narrative and should be provided with context. Lists of data without any contextual narrative are not encouraged.
- 5.0.6. All data required to support the narrative should be summarised within the narrative.

5.1. Assessment

- 5.1.1. The UL SPRE score will be determined by sub-panels, and the approach to the assessment of the ILS will be fully developed during the criteria phase.
- 5.1.2. The IL and UL SPRE scores will be published separately, but the IL SPRE score will be worth 60% of the SPRE element for the UL profile. Three types of SPRE scores will be reported, the ILS score, the ULS score, and a combined score for each unit.
- 5.1.3. As for REF 2021, both statements will be assessed using the criteria of vitality and sustainability. The definitions for these criteria will be developed for SPRE by the sub-panels, and a cross-panel IL working group, comprising of representatives from the main panels and the advisory panels.
- 5.1.4. *The criteria for the IL and UL statements will be published as part of the Panel criteria and linked here.*
- 5.1.5. To inform the panels' assessment of the 'People' section of both the IL and UL statements, the **People and Diversity Advisory Panel (PDAP)** will provide advice on overall strengths or areas of concern, on the basis of the generic assessment criteria and procedures. The **Research Diversity Advisory Panel (RDAP)** will provide equivalent advice on aspects relating

to research diversity, interdisciplinarity and responsible approaches to research engagement and impact.

- 5.1.6. PDAP and RDAP will carry out calibration exercises at an early stage in the assessment to develop a collective understanding of the assessment criteria and standards.
- 5.1.7. Each sub-panel will retain responsibility for recommending the quality profile for all work that was submitted in its UoA.
- 5.1.8. The Panel criteria will describe the sub-panels' and IL working group's approach to the assessment including the use of the quantitative data. The sub-panels will also comment on their use of the ILS in informing their assessment of the ULS. ***Further guidance will be published as part of the Panel criteria and will be linked here.***

5.2. Expanded opportunity for demonstrating excellence

- 5.2.1. REF 2029 values research environments that enable diverse and excellent research, engagement and impact, are supportive of their people and contribute positively to the wider research ecosystem and society.
- 5.2.2. We recognise that building excellent research, engagement and impact environments takes time and is done collaboratively with both researchers and staff who enable or support research, engagement and impact. As such, REF 2029 is expanding the opportunity to demonstrate excellence to encourage institutions and units to include context that allows them to show the distance travelled and adaptive strategies used to sustain and improve aspects of the research environment since the last REF.
- 5.2.3. Where relevant, narratives could consider commenting on:
 - the challenges remaining, at the end of the last REF, in creating positive research cultures and research environments
 - which policies, processes and support have been introduced and why, including any external partnerships and collaborations that have contributed to resilience, improvement, or innovation in the research environment
 - evidence for the effectiveness of these activities, partnerships or collaborations and how they have enabled the achievement of the desired outcomes
 - challenges that have been overcome to improve the research environment and/or how challenges have been managed strategically

(including resource constraints) with outcomes informing the evolution of strategy

- 5.2.4. This type of approach might not fit all sections of the template, but where it is found, a positive approach to developing research environments will be recognised in the assessment. Panels will review their approach to assessing these aspects. ***We will publish this in the Panel criteria and link it here.***
- 5.2.5. In all cases, statements should show, where possible, the effectiveness of the various policies and processes described. Where institutions and/or units can show that their effectiveness in supporting positive research cultures and research environments has been influential in encouraging new effective approaches in other institutions in this REF period, this will also be valued.

5.3. Submission system

- 5.3.1. Both the ILS and ULS will be submitted in the Submission system.
- 5.3.2. Graphs, charts and diagrams can be included within text narratives and will not affect the word counts. However, they should always have a description and be contextualised through the narrative.
- 5.3.3. Institutions and units may include URLs in the statements only for the purpose of verifying or corroborating claims made in the statement. Panels will not follow URLs to access additional evidence or information to supplement the submission.

6. Institution-level statement (ILS)

- 6.0.1. The ILS will contribute to the unit profile for SPRE. Quantitative data will additionally be provided to the panel to inform the assessment.
- 6.0.2. Information is required about the institution's strategy and enabling infrastructure to support research and enable impact, relating to the period 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2028.
- 6.0.3. The ILS should focus on how strategy, systems and enabling infrastructure support the research environment. It should draw links between how approaches to supporting and including people and roles enables excellent, diverse and responsible research, engagement and impact.

- 6.0.4. We anticipate the word limit for the ILS will be fixed for all sizes of institution.
- 6.0.5. The ILS will additionally be provided to sub-panels where it will be used to inform the assessment of the ULS.
- 6.0.6. The ILS will require narrative for each of the four sections, and the narrative should be supported by relevant indicators from the basket confirmed with panels in the criteria phase. The word count will be flexible across the four sections.

6.1. Discussing IL context

- 6.1.1. Context is key to fair and robust SPRE assessment and institutions will be assessed on their performance in relation to their available resources.
- 6.1.2. Institutions are encouraged to outline their context in the context, mission and strategy section of the template including aspects such as:
- the institution's stated mission and its strategy for research
 - organisational structure and key thematic research areas, approach to interdisciplinarity and research specialisms
 - organisational approach to central roles (or non-UL roles) that enable or support research, engagement and impact
 - how the institution interacts with the region and its civic or international partnerships
 - approach to funding and balance of public and private funding
 - external drivers and challenges shaping the institution's priorities
 - trajectory since 2021 including any reorganisation, the process undertaken to deliver any change, and its drivers

6.2. Suggested approach for small institutions

- 6.2.1. It is recognised that some small institutions may have fewer policies, processes and practices, or may consist of a small collection of independent units and that this may make it more difficult to generate an ILS.
- 6.2.2. Small institutions, including those comprising just one unit, are not expected to write new institutional strategies just to complete SPRE statements but should work with what they have. Where there is overlap between IL and UL strategy and practice, institutions are advised to work with the principle that the ILS is the main place to discuss strategy,

whereas the ULS is the place to discuss the implementation of strategy and practice at the unit level. Similarly, institutions and units should remember that the sub-panels will have the ILS for context, whereas the IL assessors will not have routine access to the ULS.

- 6.2.3. For institutions submitting a single unit, panels will consider whether both the IL and UL panels should be able to access both statements.
- 6.2.4. Small institutions should be reassured that all word limits are limits, not targets.
- 6.2.5. The panels will develop this guidance for small HEIs further. ***We will publish this advice with the Panel criteria and link it here.***

7. Unit-level statement (ULS)

- 7.0.1. The ULS will contribute to the unit profile for SPRE and will be assessed by the sub-panels, using the ILS and the quantitative data to inform the assessment.
- 7.0.2. We anticipate the word limit for the ULS will be less than that for the ILS but with an extra word allowance for larger units. As for the ILS, there is flexibility in how these word counts are used across the four sections of the template.
- 7.0.3. Information is required relating to the period 1 August 2020 to 31 July 2028.
- 7.0.4. The information provided in the ULS should focus on how the institution's research mission and strategy are implemented within the unit, including evidence of their effects. The ULS may discuss the effectiveness of separate or complementary UL strategy, processes and support if relevant to the context.
- 7.0.5. It is strongly recommended that ULS are written with knowledge of, and relating to, the ILS. There should be no duplication of information between the ILS and the ULS.

7.1. Discussing UL context

- 7.1.1. In addition to a **description of the research structure of the unit** the ULS context must include both the statement of representation, relating to the range of research activity in the submitting unit, and a statement on the

research community, highlighting the diverse people and roles within the submitting unit. Both statements will be used as a point of reference in the assessment of the wider UL SPRE statement. Panels will review their approach to these statements. ***We will publish this in the Panel Criteria and link it here.***

- 7.1.2. **Statement of Representation (SoR)** – full details of the statement can be found in **sub-section 7 of the CKU guidance**.
- 7.1.3. The SoR should outline how the submitting unit's outputs and associated reserve pool align with the context, research strategies, structures and changes to the academic organisation set out. It should also provide a rationale for any instances where the recommended maximum of five outputs associated with a single substantive link is exceeded, or any area of research activity that is not represented in the outputs.
- 7.1.4. This statement will be considered alongside analysis of the distribution of outputs across sub-disciplines and the number of outputs associated with each substantive link. These two data points will be generated from submission data and provided to panels with the statement.
- 7.1.5. **Statement on the research community: roles and careers** – for REF 2029, the submitted unit extends beyond those counted in the volume measure to reflect the wider research community underpinning the research environment (**see CKU guidance paragraph 7.1.**). This includes all research staff, staff who enable or support research, impact and engagement and research students.
- 7.1.6. This statement should outline the composition of the research community for each year of the REF period, describing the numbers and types of roles (including but not exclusively research technical professional and other technical roles, research managers, engagement and impact professionals, research librarians, and so on), and career stages (for example, numbers of post-doctoral fellowships, early career researchers, mid-career and expert researchers) that contribute to the unit. Its purpose is to provide contextual understanding of the people, teams, and structures that support the vitality and sustainability of the unit research environment discussed in the ULS.
- 7.1.7. There is no expectation that the ULS will map onto a single department or organisational unit. Where the submitting unit draws from multiple organisational groupings, this should be clearly identified in this statement.

7.2. UL Statement on Engagement and Impact

- 7.2.1. As specified in the **Engagement and Impact E&I guidance**, units should discuss the unit's approach to enabling impact from its research. As continued from the environment assessment in REF 2021, units should describe their approach to, and effectiveness of, **supporting and enabling engagement** and **impact**.