



Research  
England

# Circular letter

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

To	Heads of Research England-funded higher education providers
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Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal

This letter directs leaders to information about the initial decisions on the high-level design of the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) developed in partnership by the four UK higher education funding bodies (Research England, Scottish Funding Council, Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and Department for Economy, Northern Ireland).

The Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) was launched in May 2021, seeking 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.

Over the last two years, FRAP conducted wide consultation with the UK research sector (including roundtable events and two written consultations) and commissioned a number of evidence reports and analyses. We have also sought expertise advice, through an international advisory group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman, and an independent review of the use of metrics.

We are now publishing the [Initial Decisions](#) of the UK funding bodies on the high-level design of the next assessment exercise; and will also be publishing a number of supporting documents related to our engagement and work with the sector. These decisions respond to the key drivers for change that have emerged from the evaluation and consultation activities. They also take into account wider research policies and developments within and across the four nations of the UK. We have also taken into account the evolving international landscape on research assessment.

We seek to change the emphasis of national research assessment from the performance of individuals to the contribution institutions and disciplines make to healthy, dynamic and inclusive research environments. REF2028 should encourage the broader contributions to

research and research processes. Assessment panels will be encouraged to think differently about this and given this shift away from published research outputs as the main way in which excellence is demonstrated, participating HEPs should not assume that the approach to assessment in REF2028 will be the same as that utilised in REF2021.

Further evidence and discussion are required on some aspects of the framework before the funding bodies can take final decisions. This letter sets out further information on these aspects, and how views on these issues can be submitted to us. Readers are asked to note that consultation on the detailed guidance on submissions and panel criteria will take place in 2024.

### **Summary of decisions:**

The next UK research assessment exercise will be conducted in 2028, with Higher Education Providers (HEPs) making their submissions in late 2027. Assessment will be undertaken by an expert sub-panel for each Unit of Assessment (UOA), working under the guidance of four broader Main Panels. As in REF 2021, institutions will be required to submit outputs, impact case studies and a statement relating to each of the disciplinary areas (defined by the UOAs) in which they have research activity, alongside an institutional statement. These statements will contribute to the different elements of the assessment as outlined below.

REF 2028 will have an adjusted and expanded definition of research excellence. The three elements have been renamed and their content adjusted to reflect this. In order to recognise the importance of research culture, people and environment in sustainably supporting research excellence, the weightings between elements have been rebalanced to increase the emphasis on this element. The three elements and their weightings will be:

- **People, Culture and Environment (25% weighting).** This element replaces the environment element of REF 2014 and 2021 and will be expanded to include an assessment of research culture. Evidence to inform assessment of this element will be collected at both institutional level and at the level of disciplinary submissions.
- **Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (50% weighting).** This element expands the outputs element of REF 2014 and 2021. The assessment will continue to be largely based on assessment of submitted outputs. In REF 2028, however, at least 10% of the score will be based on the relevant sub-section of the disciplinary-level statement, which will provide evidence of the broader contributions to the advancement of the discipline.
- **Engagement and Impact (25% weighting).** This element replaces the impact elements of REF 2014 and 2021, although it is similar to the impact element of 2014. Submissions will consist of both impact case studies and an accompanying statement, taken from the disciplinary-level statement, to evidence engagement and impact activity beyond case studies.

REF 2028 will have a new approach to determining research volume, moving fully away from any assessment of individuals. While volume will continue to be determined by the number of staff who have significant responsibility for research and are independent researchers, these data will be drawn directly from the HESA staff record; HEPs will not be required to submit a list of staff. The volume measure will be based on an average number of staff over multiple years. The volume measures indicated in the initial decisions document are intended to determine the volume of material to be submitted to the REF. Decisions on funding outcomes based on the REF are completely separate to this process. Research England are currently reviewing their approach to strategic institutional research funding.

Research activity submitted for assessment can relate to any staff where a substantive connection to the institution can be demonstrated, not just research carried out by staff that contribute to the volume measure. Submitting HEPs will be required to provide indicators of substantive connection to the institution, and such connections will be evaluated and audited during the assessment process. Further guidance will be provided on this in Guidance on Submissions. In REF 2028 there will not be any minimum or maximum contributions of any individuals. These changes will increase the inclusivity of the assessment, and provide an environment that is supportive of researchers who move into academia from other sectors.

**Consultation:**

Although the [Initial Decisions document](#) sets the high-level framework for REF 2028, there are a number of matters on which further consultation and work is needed. Some of these will be pursued through a short, focused [consultation](#), while other matters will require discussion with the expert panels once they have been appointed (during the first half of 2024). We also intend to commission further work on the approach to evidence gathering on research culture for the People, Culture and Environment element, including potential indicators.

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 at [Annex A](#) of this letter). Please respond to the [consultation](#) by noon on 6 October 2023.

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. We are excited about the ambition set out in this initial framework and invite institutions to work collectively and in partnership with the UK Funding Bodies to realise the opportunity it presents.

Yours faithfully,



Professor Dame Jessica Corner  
Executive Chair, Research England