

REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

**Welcome to the REF 2029
Town Hall on the
updates to
Contributions to Knowledge and
Understanding guidance**

REF 2029 Town Hall

Contributions to Knowledge and Understanding Guidance

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Purpose

- The intention is to provide an explanation of the CKU policy, addressing common queries we receive, and highlighting what was updated in December, creating a reference point for those preparing the submission.
- Aiming to cover this with time remaining available for Q&A at the end to identify areas where additional clarity might be needed.
- Developing opportunities for further engagement with REF team and Secretariat to support and clarify, and further information on these events will be published.
- For additional support on technical detail, please contact us via Info@ref.ac.uk queries

What is the Research Excellence Framework?

REF is owned and led by the four UK higher education funding bodies



- It:
 - informs allocation of around £2bn of block-grant funding each year
 - provides accountability for public investment in research
 - continually evolves, alongside our research base
 - (given the connection to allocation of funds) inevitably drives behaviour and therefore is a significant policy instrument across the UK

Principles and functions for REF 2029:

1. REF should fulfil the following purposes:

- **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 **insight into the health of research** in HEIs in the UK.

2. REF should underpin:

- A research system that produces **high-quality, rigorous** research that is **open** to all;
- An **inclusive and collaborative** research system that supports a diversity of people, ideas, institutions, methodologies, outputs, and activities; and
- An **engaged and impactful** research system that connects research with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change.

3. REF decision making should be driven by:

- **Robustness** of assessment outcomes
- Impact of the system on **research culture**
- Ensuring that the **bureaucratic burden** of the system is proportionate.

Introduction to Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding Guidance

- Replaces ‘Outputs’ from REF 2021
- Guidance module includes rules pertaining to outputs
- Published June 2025 and updated December 2025

Key changes from REF 2021

- Decoupling
- No collection of staff details
- Introduction of Substantive Link
- Removal of minimum and introduction of a recommended maximum
- New process for Unit reduction requests

Key updates to June 2025 guidance

- Increase in weighting of the CKU element to 55% of REF 2029
- Refinement of the substantive link guidance
- Inclusion of the Statement of Representation within SPRE Unit level statements (ULS) and removal of the DLS component of the CKU element
- Introduction of a recommended maximum number of outputs per substantive link in a UoA submission
- Move form 1:1 reserve items to a reserve pool
- Confirm double-weighting rather than triple or quadruple options

Eligible outputs

- HEIs must decide which outputs to select for submission, in accordance with this guidance and its REF 2029 CoP.
- The number of outputs required in a submission is determined by multiplying the volume measure by 2.5 at UoA level. The result is then rounded to the nearest whole number, with .5 results rounded up. The full detail of this is in the Volume Measure guidance.
- Joint and multiple submissions will continue to be supported in REF 2029, full policy and process will be published in due course.

Core requirements of eligible outputs

Each submitted output must:

- be the product of research, briefly defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared
- have first been brought into the public domain during the publication **period 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2028** or, if a confidential report, lodged with the body to whom it is confidential during this same period
- have a **substantive link** to the HEI making the submission
- for outputs within scope of the Open Access policy, meet the requirements of that policy

Substantive link

- A substantive link describes the relationship between an HEI and research, submitted in the form of an output.
- The HEI must have enabled the research leading to an output that is first made publicly available during the output eligibility period.
- A substantive link must be evidenced through an eligible employment relationship with an author (or equivalent) who has made a significant research contribution to the output.

Eligible Employment Relationship

Eligible employment relationships are defined as:

- A minimum of 0.2 FTE for at least 12 months continuous employment by the HEI making the submission. Continuous employment may be demonstrated by a sequence of consecutive contracts

AND

- the role descriptor includes an explicit expectation of research activity (in line with the REF definition of research) within the role. ‘Research activity’ is not restricted by profession and an eligible employment relationship may be with any staff member who undertakes, enables or supports research

Timing of eligible employment relationships

An eligible employment relationship must have occurred, either:

At the point at which the submitted output was first made publicly available,

- An output may first be made publicly available at any point during the eligible employment relationship

OR

Before the submitted output was first made publicly available, when the research resulting in the output was carried out.

- For most outputs this time-limited period will have occurred between January 2021 to December 2028
- This time-limited period may be extended prior to January 2021 providing that the output was published during the REF publication period.
- The time-limited period will be longer for long-form or extended process outputs

Eligible employment relationships that **occur after the point at which an output was first made publicly available** cannot constitute a substantive link.

Long-form/Extended process exception

This exception will apply to long-form and/or extended process outputs only, and will allow the submission of these output types in REF 2029 where an eligible employment relationship occurs after the point that the output is first made publicly available, for a time-limited period.

Where a researcher is employed on a contract that constitutes an eligible employment relationship at an institution at the point a REF submission is made, **long-form and/or extended process outputs** published before this contract commenced will be eligible for submission if:

- they were first made publicly available during the REF period (January 2021 to December 2028) **and**
- the staff member's eligible employment relationship with the submitting institution commenced within 5 years of the output first being made publicly available

Definitions for both long-form and extended process outputs can be found within the guidance and there will be additional panel specific detail published as part of the Panel Criteria and Working Methods.

Exclusions, exceptions and exceptional circumstances

Exclusions

- Outputs sole-authored by, or where the **only** substantive link to the institutions is through PGRs (including PhD theses), visiting or honorary staff, staff on teaching only contracts, individuals employed on academic or other contracts with no explicit expectation of research within the job role, will not be eligible for submission:

Exceptions and exceptional circumstances

- In exceptional, clearly justified and pre-cleared cases, outputs sole-authored by staff on teaching-only, honorary emeritus or other non-research contracts may be submitted
- Additionally, outputs may be eligible if the author has been subsequently employed on a contract that meets the criteria for an eligible employment relationship

Redundancy

- Outputs where the substantive link occurred before the submitted output was made publicly available, will not be eligible for submission where the author was subject to compulsory redundancy.
- HEIs must set out their approaches to submitting eligible outputs by staff made redundant in their CoP
- The end of a fixed term contract should be considered separately to compulsory redundancy

Representative Submissions

- Statements of representation form part of the SPRE element of submissions and further guidance around how they will be used in the assessment will be published following the criteria phase panel meetings.
- The expectation is that submissions include the highest quality research across all the disciplines in which an HEI is active.
- Submissions should be representative of the research undertaken by the submitting unit during the REF period. They should reflect the range of **research activity** in the UoA.
- This is intended to mitigate concerns that full decoupling could lead to the underrepresentation of research areas and research groups.

Recommended Maximum

- The expectation is that no more than 5 outputs are associated with a single substantive link within a submission at UoA level. Where this number is exceeded, the submitting unit should explain the rationale within the statement of representation.
- This is intended to support HEIs and to ensure that submissions are representative of the full range of research within the submitting unit.

Statement of Representation

- A submitting unit comprises the collection of **subject structures, research groups and research activity** in an HEI, submitting to a UOA.
- The **representativeness** of submissions will be **addressed within the SPRE Unit Level Statements**
- **The important issues of research diversity, demographics and career stages will be assessed as part of the wider SPRE statements.**
- The statement of representation will not be directly scored but will be used as a point of reference in the assessment of the wider unit-level SPRE statements.
- An HEI's process for ensuring output submissions are representative of the research activity being undertaken must be outlined within the Institutional CoP to ensure that they are transparent, robust and equitable

Significant research contribution

- In cases of multi-author outputs, it may be necessary to demonstrate that a significant research contribution (SRC) was made by an author with an eligible employment relationship to the HEI.
- It is anticipated that the approach to demonstrating SRC will broadly align with the approach used in REF 2021.
- Further guidance will be developed by panels and published as part of the Criteria and Working Methods

Assigning outputs to UoAs

- Where an author's contract has been associated with a UoA, there is no requirement for the output to be submitted to the same UoA.
- HEIs are responsible for mapping outputs to the UoAs to which they are associated. This involves careful consideration of the output's subject matter, the UoA descriptors, and the overall research strategy of the institution.
- An output cannot be included more than once within the same UoA submission by one HEI.
- An output can be included in the submission to multiple UoAs at the same institution, however the output must meaningfully align with the disciplinary areas defined by each of the UoA's descriptors.
- An output will be assessed separately for each UoA it is submitted to and may score differently in each case.

Interdisciplinary research

- REF 2029 encourages the submission of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary outputs.
- No IDR flag will be used, after feedback from REF 2021 that indicated this is not an effective tool.
- Outputs may be submitted to multiple UoAs at the same institutions.
- UOA descriptors are intended to be sufficiently broad to support Inter and transdisciplinary outputs.
- It is anticipated that submission to more than two UoAs will increase the likelihood of audit.
- Cross referral requests will remain a feature of REF 2029.

Reserve lists

Reserve items will not be submitted on a one-to-one basis, rather they will be submitted as a prioritised list. When a reserve item is required, the output at the top of the reserve list will be assessed.

Outputs with delayed publication

- Institutions may include a reserve output for each output expected to be made publicly available between the submission date and the end of the publication period (31 December 2028).
- A reserve output will only be assessed where the original output is not made publicly available during the REF period.

Double weighting of outputs

- Panels will outline the criteria for double-weighted outputs.
- Institutions' requests for double-weighting must be accompanied by a statement of up to 100 words explaining how the scale and scope of the output satisfies these criteria.
- A reserve output will only be assessed if the panel does not accept the request for double-weighting.

Confidential outputs

- Confidential reports include any item produced for and lodged, in the publication period, with a company, government body or other research sponsor(s), but which has not been published because of its commercial or other sensitivity.
- They can only be submitted where the HEI has prior permission from the sponsoring organisation.
- They will be shared only with the REF team and those involved in the assessment process and will be destroyed as soon as no longer required.
- They will not be listed as part of the published submissions
- More information on how to do this will be published with the forthcoming special request policy and process.

Unit Reduction Requests

In exceptional circumstances, institutions may submit a request to reduce the number of outputs to be submitted to a UoA. Requests must meet the following criteria:

- **Exceptional circumstances:** the request must be based on exceptional circumstances that were unforeseen and outside the institution's control.
- **Significant impact:** the circumstances must have had a significant impact on the UoA's ability to research productively.
- **Evidence-based:** the request must be supported by clear and compelling evidence, including data or details of the exceptional circumstances, and an explanation of how these circumstances have impacted the UoA.

Institutions wishing to submit a unit reduction request must do so to the REF team and will be informed of decisions in writing.

Audit

- REF 2029 will audit robustly. The full audit guidance is being developed.
- Audit may focus on (but is not limited to)
 - Verification of output selection
 - Verification of output UoA assignment
 - Cross referral remains available

Thank you and stay in touch

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- Please visit **get involved** on our website to view current opportunities.
- Email us at **info@ref.ac.uk** if you have any suggestions about how we can improve our guidance for you.

