

REF 2029

Survey on final policy developments

Kim Hackett

Member of the REF Steering Group and Research England Director of
Insight and Engagement

Helena Mills

REF Director

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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

Why this survey, and why now

Aim: to test a small number of remaining proposals and draft guidance areas where feedback can still improve clarity, workability and consistency before final guidance is published in the autumn.

Survey topics

Section A – Draft SPRE criteria

Section B – Single unit of assessment submissions for SPRE

Section C – Approach to equality-related unit reductions

Section D – Submission of outputs to more than one UoA

Section E – Period of request for SPRE quantitative data (research doctoral degrees and research income)

Section F – 100-word statement for Engineering

Open to HEIs,
representative bodies,
learned societies, and
other organisations or
individuals with an
interest in research
assessment.

Section A – Draft Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) Criteria

IL and UL statements

- SPRE assessed at both institution level (IL) and unit level (UL), scored separately.
- Draft assessment criteria have been developed to describe how panels will assess IL and UL statements.
- We are seeking views on whether the criteria clearly distinguish between institution-level and unit-level assessment.

Section A – Draft Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) Criteria

Statement of Representation (SoR)

Addresses distribution of outputs and reserve list across disciplines and substantive links.

Explains concentration or omission, including exceeding the recommended maximum.

Statement on the Research Community (SoC)

Describes the wider research community, beyond those counted in the volume measure.

All research staff, enabling staff, research students, relevant external contributors (e.g. NHS colleagues).

Section B – Single UoA SPRE submissions

- Addresses concerns about the feasibility of distinguishing between IL strategy and UL activity in separate submissions.
- Proposal
 - submit one institution-level template plus SoC and SoR.
 - Institutions would also need to address their approach to enabling engagement and impact and their process for choosing impact case studies.
 - As with all submissions, the IL SPRE panel would assess how excellent research is sustained, the sub-panel would assess how the research mission and strategy are implemented within the unit.
 - Full separate IL and UL submission route remains available.

Section C – Equality-related unit reductions:

Principles

- Ensure appropriate recognition of the effect equality-related circumstances can have upon research capacity in a submitting unit.
- Create the right incentives for HEIs to support staff with equality-related circumstances.
- Recognise the potential disparity in the available output pool for units in particular contexts.
- Maintain the integrity and robustness of the exercise.
- Ensure the submission requirements of the process are proportionate to the identified need for it.

Small units

The potential for a disproportionate impact is more likely in small units. Therefore, unit reductions should exceptionally be requested for submitting units with a volume measure smaller than 10 FTE.

Section C – Equality-related unit reductions:

Proposed approach

- For the purposes of this assessment, a disproportionate effect would typically correspond to a reduction of 15% or more in research capacity over the REF period.

Worked example

A 6 CONFTE unit has 48 person-years across the REF period (8 years × 6 CONFTE). A 15% reduction equates to at least 7.2 person-years lost.

- Maximum 500-word case, covering: estimated capacity loss (person-years), disciplinary factors, impact on the available output pool (accounting for decoupled flexibility), any remaining limitations.
- Confidentiality: institutions must not disclose individual equality-related circumstances; evidence must be collected without requiring staff declarations of specific circumstances.

Section D — Outputs submitted to multiple UoAs

- Decoupled REF: outputs are not tied to individuals.
- Amended rule: an output may be returned once per UoA, and up to the number of substantive links the institution holds to it.
- Panels are more likely to query outputs submitted to more than two UoAs.

Worked example

HEI has 4
substantive links to
a journal article

Article aligns with 5
different UoA
descriptors

HEI may submit to
up to 4 of the 5
UoAs (one per
substantive link)

Cannot submit to
all 5 (insufficient
substantive links)

Cannot submit to
the same UoA
more than once

Section E — SPRE quantitative data changes

- Proposal
 - Remove final REF assessment year (2027/28) from doctoral degrees and research income data requirement.
 - Data drawn from HESA for all years up to and including the penultimate year (2020/21–2026/27).
- Mirrors the approach already taken for the REF 2029 volume measure.
- Income-in-kind (formerly REF4c) proposed for discontinuation,
 - Still valued as a narrative indicator within SPRE statements.
 - Submitting units whose research relies on income-in-kind are encouraged to report it as part of their SPRE statement.

Section F — Engineering 100-word statements

- In REF 2021, UoA 12: Engineering found a short factual statement describing the significance of an output (where not fully evident within the output itself) useful in their assessment processes but also recognise the potential for burden that creation of these statements places on HEIs.
- Proposal for REF 2029: continue inviting factual statements **for** submissions to **UoA 12 only** (max 100 words) — e.g. recognition, led to further developments
- Survey testing whether this should continue, assessing the trade-off between value and burden

How to respond and next steps

- Live survey form open now until 4pm, 4 September 2026.
- Use the supporting information document to view the proposals and prepare responses.
- The full proposals are only in the pdf. The survey platform contains the questions only.
- No save-and-return, complete and submit in one sitting.

Q&A

- We will now take your questions, please use the **upvoting** buttons and we will aim to cover those of most interest.
- Email us at **info@ref.ac.uk** if you have any suggestions about how we can improve our guidance for you.