

Research Excellence Framework 2029 survey on final policy developments

30 July 2026 to 4 September 2026

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Introduction

The four UK higher education funding bodies are seeking targeted feedback on a small number of policy areas for final development of REF 2029 that have emerged from criteria-phase panel meetings. The survey will remain open until 4pm on 4 September 2026.

This short survey is intended to test the clarity, robustness and implementation of a small number of proposals that have emerged through the criteria-setting process. Feedback will inform the final guidance and criteria, and support of final guidance and criteria as scheduled in autumn 2026. The survey is not a formal consultation and does not seek wider input on the existing published REF 2029 guidance.

The REF team invites responses from higher education institutions, representative bodies, learned societies, and other organisations or individuals with an interest in higher education research assessment. Responses will be used to support the final refinement of policies and guidance before publication.

We will commit to read, record and analyse responses to this survey in a consistent manner. As with previous surveys and consultation activity:

- a) it will be a fair and balanced summary of responses rather than individual responses that inform decision making
- b) in most cases the merit of the arguments made is likely to be given more weight than the number of times the same point is made

- c) responses from organisations or representative bodies with high interest in the survey topics, or likelihood of being affected most by the proposals, are likely to carry more weight than those with little or none

As such, it is likely that not every suggestion or piece of feedback will be enacted. However, all suggestions and feedback will be considered.

Please note that there is no option to save and return to the survey so please complete and submit it in one go. There is also no option to print or save a copy of your submitted response. You can make use of this document to prepare your answers.

Note on data handling

Responses to this survey will be shared with the four UK higher education funding bodies (Research England, Medr, the Scottish Funding Council, and the Department for the Economy Northern Ireland) to inform the final development of REF 2029 guidance and criteria. An anonymised summary of responses will be published in due course.

Please note that, all responses may be disclosed on request, under the terms of the relevant Freedom of Information Acts across the UK. The Acts give a public right of access to any information held by a public authority, in this case the four UK funding bodies. This includes information provided in response to a consultation. We have a responsibility to decide whether any responses, including information about your identity, should be made public or treated as confidential. We can refuse to disclose information only in exceptional circumstances. This means that responses to this consultation are unlikely to be treated as confidential except in very particular circumstances. For further information about the Acts see the [Information Commissioner's Office website](#), or in Scotland, the [website of the Scottish Information Commissioner](#).

Where AI tools (Microsoft Copilot, using enterprise data protection) are used to help analyse or summarise responses, any data fields containing names and contact details will be removed before that response is passed to Copilot. No names, contact details or other individual-identifying information should be contained in free-text responses, and we will undertake a data cleaning process to check for and remove any instances we identify before passing responses to Copilot. Copilot is not used to make decisions.

For general information on how we store and process your data, and your rights under UK GDPR, please see the [UKRI privacy notice](#).

Draft proposals and survey questions

This document sets out the draft proposals on which we are seeking feedback, and the questions on these proposals that are set out in the survey. The questions are presented here for ease of reference, however, to respond the survey please use the live form between 11am 30 July and 4pm on 4 September 2026.

Access the live form here: [REF 2029 survey on final policy developments – Fill in form](#)

Questions about the respondent

About your response:

1. I am responding on behalf of a higher education institution
2. I am responding on behalf of another group or organisation
3. I am responding as an individual

Your answer to the above will take you to one of the three pathways below to confirm supplementary information before starting the survey. The survey questions will be the same for all types of respondents.

Questions about the respondent – pathway 1 – on behalf of a higher education institution

- Name of institution
- UKPRN
- Your name
- Your email address
- I confirm I have authority to submit this information on behalf of my institution
 - Yes (mandatory)
- I consent to the personal information shared on this form being held and processed by the REF Team and the four UK funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. I understand that this information can be shared on request with other members of the HEI or organisation I have inputted, to aid collaboration and avoid duplication. For example, to confirm if an organisational response has been submitted and by whom.
 - Yes (mandatory)

Questions about the respondent – pathway 2 – on behalf of a group or organisation

- Name of group or organisation
- Type of group or organisation:
 - Business
 - Charity
 - Department or research group
 - Public sector organisation
 - Representative body
 - Subject association or learned society
 - Other
- Your name
- Your email address
- I confirm I have authority to submit this information on behalf of the named group or organisation
 - Yes (mandatory)
- I consent to the personal information shared on this form being held and processed by the REF Team and the four UK funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the

survey. I understand that this information can be shared on request with other members of the HEI or organisation I have inputted, to aid collaboration and avoid duplication. For example, to confirm if an organisational response has been submitted and by whom.

- Yes (mandatory)

Questions about the respondent – pathway 3 – individual

- Please tell us about where you work:
 - Business
 - Charity
 - Department or research group
 - Higher education institution
 - Public sector organisation
 - Representative body
 - Subject association or learned society
 - Not in employment/retired
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other
- What is your role at the higher education institution? (only appears if Higher education institution has been selected above)
 - Academic – research only
 - Academic – teaching
 - Academic – teaching and research
 - Professional services
 - Senior leadership
 - Technical
 - Prefer not to say
 - Other

Section A – Draft SPRE criteria

A.1 Background

As set out in the published guidance, REF 2029 will assess Strategy, People, and Research Environment (SPRE) at both institution level (IL) and unit level (UL). SPRE is the element through which institutions and units demonstrate how their strategies, people, culture, systems and research environments support the delivery of excellent research and impact. The institution-level and unit-level submissions will be assessed separately and will focus on different aspects of the research environment. The UL statement will also include new elements, including a Statement of Representation (SoR) and a Statement on Research Community (SoC).

The core SPRE framework, including the balance between institution- and unit-level statements and the retention of REF 2021's Environment foundations, was confirmed in December 2025 and is not in scope for this survey. This survey instead focuses on elements of the draft criteria that panels have since

developed within that framework to check they are clear and workable in practice before they are finalised.

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, and whether the proposed criteria for the SoR and SoC are clear. We are also testing proposals for an approach to submitting IL and UL SPRE statements for institutions submitting in one UoA only, which the REF 2029 pilot did not directly examine. Feedback received will inform final development of the criteria during the REF 2029 criteria-setting phase.

A.2 Elements of the draft SPRE panel criteria for feedback

To enable the sector to consider and comment on the clarity of the draft guidance and criteria relating to specific aspects of the SPRE element, we have set out below the draft guidance for the relevant sections only. The full SPRE guidance and criteria will be published in autumn 2026.

We are seeking feedback on the draft guidance and criteria across three aspects as follows:

- clarity on the distinction between IL and UL statements
- clarity of the draft guidance on the Statement on Research Community and Statement on Representation
- proposals for the approach to SPRE submission for HEIs submitting only to one UoA (covered in Section B)

Clarity on distinction between IL and UL statements

Draft SPRE panel criteria: Assessment overview

SPRE will be assessed at both institution level (IL) and unit level (UL). The two statements will be assessed separately. IL and UL statements will be assessed and scored separately by the institution-level (IL) panel and the sub-panels respectively.

Both IL and UL statements will be informed by an unscored context section. For the UL statement, the context section will include the Statement of Representation and the Statement on the Community ([SPRE guidance section 7.1](#)) Each statement will be read as an integrated narrative, identifying and crediting the strength of evidence throughout. Guidance relating to each section is designed to help institutions place the most relevant evidence in the most appropriate place. Each domain, corresponding to the section headings noted below, will be assessed, informing an overall quality profile.

All panels will attach equal weighting to each of the four domains of the templates.

- mission and strategy (25%)
- people (25%)
- income, infrastructure and facilities (25%)
- collaboration, engagement and impact (25%)

Panels may use submitted information from across the whole statement to inform each section's grade. Assessment of the People section will be informed by guidance from the People and Diversity Advisory Panel (PDAP) to ensure equitable recognition of diverse roles.

Assessment will be informed by the information included in the SPRE statements – no further reading should be required. URLs should only be included for the purpose of verifying or corroborating claims made in the submission. Panels will not follow URLs to access additional evidence or information to supplement the submission.

In assessing both IL and UL SPRE statements, the IL panel and sub-panels will consider submissions in the context of size and type of institution to enable judgements to be made on an equitable basis.

[Draft SPRE panel criteria: Approach to statement writing](#)

Each section of the statements should demonstrate:

- **The institution's/unit's approach to equality, diversity and inclusion:** statements should include approaches to promoting equality through the active inclusion of a diverse range of staff and research student roles and voices, particularly for under-represented groups, in the development and implementation of their strategy.
- **Critical and transparent reflection that demonstrates development over the REF period:** statements should contain a balanced reflection of the institution's/unit's research cultures within the context of internal and external change and challenge, and in light of learning over time. They should show how institutional/unit resource allocation, strategic focus, and the maturity of the institution's/unit's research culture strategy support and/or maintain research excellence. SPRE recognises the gap that may exist between institutional/unit ambitions and the reality of everyday practice. Mechanisms to identify and address gaps and unintended consequences are a characteristic of an effective research environment and assessors do not expect to see uniform improvement across sections.
- **Evidence of the effectiveness of policies and practices designed to enhance research excellence:** statements should tightly couple narrative with evidence, drawing on the suggested indicators or other relevant measures to explain what has improved, where progress has been limited and why, and how this evidence has informed decision-making, prioritisation, and subsequent action. Assessors will be interested in evidence from the whole lifecycle of activity, for example, how institutions or units have:
 - identified and addressed priorities for enabling and sustaining research excellence across disciplinary and interdisciplinary breadth
 - co-developed and delivered improved research environments across the institution
 - evaluated these policies and practices and reflected on how less positive outcomes have/will be addressed through clear action

Draft SPRE panel criteria: IL / UL interaction

IL statements should narrate how institutions enable and sustain excellent research proportionate to their institutional context across their submitting units but may choose to discuss this in terms of main panel level breadth and coverage rather than needing to reference each individual unit of assessment to which a submission is being made. They should focus on how strategy, systems and enabling infrastructure support the research environment. They should indicate how approaches to supporting and including people and roles enables excellent, diverse and responsible research, engagement and impact. UL statements should focus on how the HEI's institution-level research mission and strategy are implemented within the submitting unit, including evidence of their effects. The UL statement may also discuss the effectiveness of separate or complementary unit-level strategy, processes and support if relevant to the context of the submitting unit.

Assessors will look for evidence of integration between IL and UL statements where relevant to the context. Evidence could include coordinated activity to improve research environments and/or co-development of the statements. Well-coordinated statements will clearly demonstrate the two-way relationship, in other words where units have influenced institutional strategy (this will not be relevant to every unit), and where institutional strategy has shaped activity and direction within units (while recognising disciplinary differences). This approach will also avoid unnecessary duplication between IL and UL statements. Strong statements will demonstrate relevant complementarity between institution and units and combine reflective narrative with robust evidence.

To facilitate robust assessment of the relationship between the IL and UL statements, the IL panel and sub-panels will share with each other insights from their calibration exercises for IL and UL statements respectively. The IL panel will be able to use panel-instigated audit queries to check the veracity of particular IL claims against a selection of UL statements at the institution. The sub-panels will read the IL statements for context in assessing the UL statements. There will also be a mechanism for dialogue between the IL panel and sub-panels to share information from panel-instigated audit queries to ensure the robustness of the assessment process and to ensure effort is not duplicated in the verification of evidence.

Draft SPRE panel criteria: SPRE IL Assessment

Institutional-level SPRE evaluates how effectively institutions support and sustain research, engagement and impact excellence through their strategy, people, and research environment. SPRE IL statements will be assessed by a dedicated SPRE IL assessment panel. The panel will be recruited following the criteria setting phase and contain representatives from the main panels.

Presentation of longitudinal data which informs the institution's approach to SPRE and demonstrates effectiveness in terms of outcomes over time is encouraged. Statements should explain the context and relevance of any data supplied. Data should be presented in absolute numbers and percentages and may be combined or omitted where numbers are not large enough to ensure anonymity or robust interpretation. The absence of numbers will not be detrimental where small numbers mean anonymity would be compromised. The IL panel will be provided with the standard quantitative data and standard analyses to inform the assessment ([SPRE guidance section 4.1](#))

Where required as part of the assessment IL assessors will have the ability to request access to relevant UL statements to inform their assessment. Any small unit exceptions and their volume measure granted for the institution will also be available to the panel.

The panel has no pre-formed view of the ideal size or organisational structure that supports its research environments, or of the ideal context or approach for enabling engagement and impact, and will judge each submission on its merits, contextualised appropriately to the nature of the institution.

IL statements should show holistic coverage of institutional priorities impacting the experience of leading and conducting research. IL statements should present a whole-institution picture across all four sections, not isolated examples of excellence in particular disciplines. This does not require name checking every unit submitted, but institutions should address priorities within each main panel area submitted to. Statements should demonstrate how policies translate into measurable improvements in researcher experience with full coverage across units.

Draft SPRE panel criteria: SPRE UL assessment

Unit-level SPRE evaluates how effectively units support and sustain research, engagement and impact excellence through their strategy, people, and research environment. SPRE UL statements will be assessed by the sub-panels.

There is no assumption that the unit refers to a single department or coherent organisational unit. The sub-panels believe that excellent research can be undertaken in a wide variety of research structures and environments, and outstanding impacts achieved from within a wide variety of research contexts and resulting from a wide diversity of approaches. The sub-panels consider that the health of the disciplines represented within the sub-panels is well served by this variety. The sub-panels have no pre-formed view of the ideal size or organisational structure for a research environment, or of the ideal context or approach for enabling impact, and will judge each submission on its merits, contextualised appropriately to the nature of institution. Sub-panels will assess, on an equal basis, submissions that reflect the work of administrative units such as departments and submissions that do not map neatly onto departmental or other administrative structures within HEIs.

Sub-panels are aware of past correlation between unit size and assessed quality of the research environment and will value the quality of initiatives and developments relative to the size and context of the unit, not just the quantity. Sub-panels will value the development of the research environment relative to the amount of funding available to units rather than score the amount of funding received directly.

Clarity on requirements for the Statement of Representation and Statement on the Research Community

Draft SPRE panel criteria: UL contextual information and standard indicators

Unit level statements will contain a contextual section. The sub-panels' scoring of the SPRE UL statement will be informed by contextual information provided in that section. The context itself will not be scored but it will provide evidence of the extent to which the research strategy and policies outlined within the UL statement are reflected.

The context section within the UL statement comprises:

- an overview of how the unit is structured academically
- the statement of representation
- the statement on the research community

The sub-panels will additionally inform their assessment using:

- the IL statement for the institution (or institutions, if a joint submission).
- the standard unit-level quantitative data and standard data analysis ([SPRE guidance paragraph 4.2](#))

Draft SPRE panel criteria: Context: Academic Structure

Given that there is no expectation that the UL SPRE element of submissions relates to a single coherent organisational unit, submissions should explain any distinct groups or units covered, particularly where discrete organisational units form part of a single submission. Neither the existence of research groups nor their absence is, in itself, considered significant by the sub-panels.

Draft SPRE panel criteria: Context: Statement of Representation

The expectation is that submissions will include the highest quality research across all the disciplines in which an HEI has been active over the REF period. The Statement of Representation (SoR) provides an opportunity for units to address the distribution of their submitted outputs and associated reserve list across the recorded substantive links and across disciplines within the submitting unit, accounting for areas of concentration or omission. The SoR will, therefore, describe the diversity of the research using the list of broad research areas for the UoA and how the output distribution aligns to this. The extent to which there is coherence between SPRE UL statements, and the Statement of Representation will be used to contextualise and inform sub-panel's assessment of the UL statement.

Sub-panels expect to see reflection on any areas of concentration or omission in comparison to how the unit is described in the Context: academic structure section. UL statements are encouraged to contextualise this in terms of the unit's past and future development. Full guidance on the content of the Statement of Representation, and its role within SPRE can be found within [7 Representative Submissions](#) in the CKU guidance and [7.1 Discussing UL context](#) in the SPRE guidance.

Research diversity

As stated in the [CKU guidance 5.6.7](#), an underpinning principle of the REF is that all forms of research output and research practice will be assessed on a fair and equal basis. Sub-panels will not regard any form of output as innately of greater or lesser quality than another, and all subject matter will be assessed equally, without bias.

Units are encouraged to consider the full diversity of output types and methodologies available within their unit, when selecting outputs for submission.

Exceeding the recommended maximum

The expectation is that there will generally be no more than five outputs attributed to a single substantive link within a unit submission, to ensure that submissions cover the full range of research produced within the submitting unit. The sub-panels recognise that there are some occasions where the recommended maximum of 5 is exceeded, and this must be discussed within the Statement of Representation. Units should demonstrate to the panel that one or more of the following criteria apply where the unit exceeds the indicative maximum:

- variation in research capacity that has skewed the distribution of outputs within the output pool due to:
 - equality-related circumstances
 - significant staff changes over the period, for example, recent recruitment of staff
 - impact of unforeseen events that have had an uneven effect on research capacity, for example, fire, flood, cyber-attack, geopolitical barriers or financial crisis
- output distribution is disproportionately skewed due to established publication practices within the discipline, for example, to enable submission of reserve outputs for double weighted outputs, or where there are high proportions of double weighted outputs

Where comments are made about equality-related circumstances, units should not report specific circumstances but comment only on how many broad research areas are affected and the extent to which they are impacted.

Sub-panels will review the information provided against the criteria and will use this to understand the context of the submitting unit. Where sub-panels do not consider justifications to meet the criteria this will be taken into account in the assessment of relevant sections of the UL statement. Sub-panels may make requests for audit where they consider this necessary. Sub-panels will ensure consistency of approach through calibration ahead of and during the assessment.

Omission of research activities or areas

The expectation is that submissions include the highest quality research across all the areas in which a unit is active. The sub-panels acknowledge that there are some occasions where a research area might not be represented within the outputs submitted as part of the unit submission and this must be discussed within the Statement of Representation. Units should demonstrate to the panels the reasons for research areas not being represented within the submissions. The criteria that apply in instances where the submission does not fully demonstrate the diversity of the unit's research activity are:

- recent investment in new research roles, strategy, or infrastructure
- investment in new research areas yet to reach maturity - this may include circumstances where research groups have been recruited from another institution within the REF period
- disciplinary norms meaning that a research area has, for example, been in an engagement, impact or knowledge exchange phase of the research cycle, or where a research area has been in a period of extended data collection, synthesis and analysis phase in extended process research

- distribution of career stages across the unit leading to certain research areas being concentrated in certain career stages
- significant disruption, for example, fire, flood, cyber-attack, geopolitical barriers or financial crisis
- exceptionally, equality-related circumstances leading to significant reduction in research capacity across an entire research area

Acknowledgement of areas for future development or investment will be considered a strength where clear routes to enhancement are outlined in the UL statement.

Where sub-panels do not judge the submitted rationale for omission of research activities to meet one or more of these criteria, the omission may be considered evidence of inequitable support for the absent sub-discipline. This may influence the sub-panels' scoring of the UL statements in regard to claims around research diversity.

Draft SPRE panel criteria: Context: Statement on Research Community

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. Where relevant, it should also include external research enabling the work of the unit beyond the HEI, for example, the work of NHS colleagues and healthcare professionals in other settings.

Statements should provide a narrative overview of the range of roles and career stages within the unit and indicate the amount of career progression through the REF cycle.

The purpose of the statement on the research community 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 UL statement.

There is no expectation that the UL statement 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.

Units with clinical academics should describe them as part of this statement. Both clinical academics that meet the Office for Strategic Coordination of Health Research (OSCHR) definition of clinical academic clinical staff and those who do not meet the OSCHR definition should be described here if relevant to the unit. Main panel A welcome inclusion of numbers of current staff or longitudinal data if the unit has it. Support for these staff should be discussed as part of the People section (2) of the template.

Draft SPRE panel criteria: Approach to UL statement writing

Submission statements are expected to show how all aspects of the unit submission relate to (implement, complement and/or contribute to) institutional strategy.

Submission statements are encouraged to show, where relevant, how the unit has contributed to policy and practice at institutional level, and/or beyond the institution.

A.3 Questions on section A

- Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: the draft SPRE criteria are clear in distinguishing between what is being assessed at institutional-level and what is being assessed at unit-level
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: the draft criteria are clear on the submission requirements for the Statement of Representation (SoR)
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement: the draft criteria are clear on the submission requirements for the Statement on research community (SoC)
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional)
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.
 - [Free text, 1500 characters]

Section B – Single unit of assessment submissions for SPRE

B.1 Background

Some institutions that submit to only a single Unit of Assessment (UoA) have raised concerns about the feasibility of distinguishing between institution-level strategy and unit-level activity in separate submissions. To address this, we are proposing an option that introduces flexibility in the submission process while maintaining a consistent and equitable approach to assessment.

B.2 Proposed approach

Under this proposal, single-unit institutions would have the option to submit only a single institution-level template, together with a Statement on the Research Community (SoC) and a Statement of Representation (SoR) – which would usually sit in the context section of the unit level template. Institutions taking up this option would also need to address within the institution-level template their approach to enabling engagement and impact and their process for choosing impact case studies as this information is also contained only in the unit-level template. Institutions taking up this option would have available only the word count for the institution-level statement plus the nominal word counts for the SoC and SoR. This submission would be assessed by both the institution-level SPRE panel and the relevant sub-panel for the subject area concerned. Where a single institution-level template is submitted, the institution-level panel and sub-panel would continue to undertake separate assessments and may arrive at different scores, reflecting the different aspects of SPRE being assessed.

As with all submissions, the institution-level SPRE panel would assess how excellent research is sustained, focusing on the extent to which strategy, systems and enabling infrastructure support the research environment. The sub-panel would assess how the research mission and strategy are implemented within the unit, including evidence of their effects. Institutions choosing this option would be encouraged to provide evidence that supports both assessments within the single institution-level template.

Single-unit institutions would also retain the option of submitting both an institution-level and a unit-level template with the full word count for each. Where separate institution-level and unit-level templates are submitted, both panels will have access to both submissions and will assess SPRE as for HEIs of any other size.

B.3 Questions on section B

- Do you work at an institution planning to submit to more than one unit of assessment?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Undecided
 - Not applicable
- Do you agree with the proposal that institutions submitting only to a single unit be provided with the option to submit only an institution-level template, in addition to a Statement on the Research Community (SoC) and a Statement of Representation (SoR)?
 - Strongly agree

- Agree
- Neither agree nor disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Not sure
- Skip question
- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional)
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.
 - [Free text, 1200 characters]

Section C – approach to equality-related unit reductions

C.1 Background

Historically, REF exercises have enabled submitting units to reduce the number of outputs they are required to submit based on equality-related circumstances. For REF 2029, an updated policy has been developed, with the aim of taking a balanced approach to recognising where the potential effect of these circumstances may be disproportionate within the context of a decoupled framework. The proposal for this approach is set out below.

C.2 Principles

The funding bodies are committed to supporting and including a range of measures within REF 2029 that are intended to promote equality, diversity, inclusion and transparency. Institutions are expected to meet their obligations under the Public Sector Equality Duty, and it is a requirement of the exercise that they develop, apply and document transparent and equitable approaches to the preparation of submissions.

Equality-related (ER) circumstances include disability, ill health, pregnancy, maternity and paternity leave, adoption leave, other family and caring-related absences and absences relating to gender reassignment or other protected characteristics.

The approach to ER unit reductions maintains broad continuity with the principles established for REF 2021, while adapting the detailed arrangements to align with the decoupled framework introduced for REF 2029. The principles are to:

- ensure appropriate recognition of the effect ER circumstances can have upon research capacity in a submitting unit
- create the right incentives for HEIs to support staff with ER circumstances (and avoid introducing negative incentives, for example, around recruitment)

- recognise the potential disparity in the available output pool for units in particular contexts, for example, where there are high proportions of staff with circumstances in very small units
- maintain the integrity and robustness of the exercise – both in supporting equality, diversity and inclusion, and ensuring the credibility of assessment process
- ensure the submission requirements of the process are proportionate to the identified need for it

C.3 Decoupled framework

The decoupled model in REF 2029 separates the staff contracts used to calculate the volume measure from the outputs selected for submission. This provides greater flexibility for institutions by broadening the pool of outputs eligible within each submitting unit and enabling submitting units to determine their submission from this expanded pool in a way that best reflects the breadth and quality of their research.

This approach is intended to support submitting units in meeting their submission requirements in an equitable and proportionate way. Institutions should therefore take a flexible approach to building their outputs for submission in a given unit, rather than setting uniform expectations about output production and contribution to the pool.

The impact of significant equality related circumstances on the available output pool is a recognised reason to exceed the maximum of five outputs per substantive link when making a submission.

C.4 Proposed approach

In view of the flexibility provided by the decoupled framework, it is expected that only a small number of cases will arise where ER circumstances have a disproportionate effect on unit capacity. Such cases will be those where the impact materially exceeds what can reasonably be accommodated within that flexibility and therefore requires recognition through a reduction in the number of outputs required for the unit.

Unit reductions are not intended to address routine variation in productivity or ordinary staff turnover, but to provide proportionate adjustment where sustained and disproportionate collective disruption has demonstrably affected the unit.

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.

C.5 Criteria for making a reduction request

Institutions may only apply for a unit reduction if the volume measure (VM) in the submitting unit after the second HESA return is less than 10 CONFTE.

Requests must not be based on staff declaration of equality-related circumstances.

Unit reductions are for submitting units where the output pool is diminished due to a disproportionate reduction in research capacity relating to ER circumstances.

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. For a unit of six full-time people (VM 6 CONFTE), this would correspond to at least 7.2 person-years across the 48 person-years (8 REF years multiplied by the VM). For a unit of nine people (VM 9 CONFTE), this would be at least 10.8 person-years out of 72 person-years.

C.6 Submitting requests

Institutions will be able to submit requests for unit reductions between January and March in 2028, after all units have been finalised in the second HESA return.

Institutions will be required to provide evidence alongside a submitted request that substantiates their claim for the loss of research capacity and the extent of disruption to the output pool. Processes for collating evidence within institutions should not require the disclosure or reporting of sensitive personal information relating to individual circumstances by staff. Institutions should have robust procedures in place to manage data for unit reduction requests confidentially and in accordance with their obligations regarding the processing of personal data, to minimise the risk of harm to individuals.

Institutions submitting a reduction request must include a declaration outlining their approach to collation of data, including procedures for managing it confidentially.

Submitted requests should include a case (max 500 words) for the reduction covering:

- an indication of the level of reduction in research capacity of the unit due to equality-related circumstances, with an indicative loss of person-years across the REF period
- any additional applicable factors related to disciplinary norms, for example, single-authored outputs, long form/extended process norms
- the nature of the impact on the submitting unit's available output pool, in the context of the submitting unit's wider research community and the flexibility offered by decoupling, and any remaining limitations that require the submitting unit to ask for a reduction

Requests should not include any information on the ER circumstances experienced by staff that have informed the submission of the request.

Using the estimate of the number of person years capacity lost, units should:

- calculate a benchmark number of outputs to be reduced by applying the percentage reduction in capacity to the number of outputs required, for example, apply a 15% reduction in the number of outputs required, where the capacity reduction over the REF period is determined to be 15%
- propose an output reduction that takes into account the percentage reduction in capacity, but also any gains or losses to the output pool, for example, gains from the increased flexibility for output eligibility or losses from disciplinary constraints due to longform outputs

C.7 Assessment of reduction requests

Requests will be considered by the REF Director in consultation with Main Panel Chairs. Advisory Panels may be consulted to support consistency and proportionality in assessment.

Requests will be assessed on the effect of circumstances on the submitting unit's research capacity within the REF period, including the reduction in capacity relative to the unit's overall capacity across the assessment period and the aggregate impact of this on the available output pool, taking account of the flexibility provided by the decoupled framework.

Where a request is made, information on its submission and outcome will be provided to main and sub-panels and published alongside the relevant assessment outcome for that submission. This information will be limited to whether a request was made and its outcome (granted in full, in part, or not granted) and will not include the details of the request itself.

C.8 Questions on section C

- Do you agree this proposal is clear and workable?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Do you agree this proposal delivers benefit without creating disproportionate burden?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Do you agree the evidence requirements are appropriate and proportionate?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional)
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies

until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.

- [Free text, 1500 characters]

Section D – Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding 13.1 – Submission of outputs to more than one UoA

D.1 Background

As set out in the [Initial Decisions](#) and in the Contributions to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU) guidance ([paragraph 13.1](#)), institutions may submit a co-authored output to more than one Unit of Assessment (UoA). This reflects the decoupled REF 2029 model, in which outputs are not tied to individual authors when determining where they are submitted. The policy gives institutions greater flexibility to return outputs in the UoAs where they are most relevant. However, outputs submitted to more than two UoAs are more likely to be selected for a panel instigated audit query. If an output is judged to have been submitted to an inappropriate UoA, it risks receiving an unclassified score.

An amendment to this policy has been developed to mitigate issues identified during the criteria phase panel meetings. The proposed amendment seeks to improve the robustness, fairness and credibility of the assessment by reducing opportunities for gaming, supporting equitable treatment of different disciplines and institutions, encouraging a broader representation of research activity, and ensuring that results are proportionate to institutional research strength rather than concentrated around a small number of outputs.

D.2 Amended approach

The amended approach would be:

As in REF 2021, each output can be returned only once per UoA. In REF 2029, the output may be returned as many times per HEI as the number of its substantive links to the institution, provided that the conditions stipulated in the CKU guidance are met. Panels are more likely to raise queries about outputs submitted to more than two UoAs.

D.3 Worked example

- An HEI has **four** substantive links to a journal article and the journal article content aligns with the unit descriptors of **five** different UoAs.
- The HEI may submit the article **to up to four** of the relevant UoAs, associating a different substantive link in each circumstance.
- The HEI may not submit the article to all five UoAs as it only has four substantive links to the output.
- The HEI may not submit the article to any single UoA more than once.

D.4 Note on Codes of Practice

A small, varied sample of near-completed Codes of Practice (CoP) were reviewed against the suggested approach. Although HEIs are taking varying approaches to assigning outputs to UoAs, none of the CoPs

reviewed had a direct conflict with the proposed policy amendment. Having conducted this analysis, the REF team do not expect there to be a widespread need for HEIs to revise CoPs in relation to this proposal.

D.5 Questions on section D

- Do you agree this proposal is clear and workable?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Do you agree this proposal delivers benefit without creating disproportionate burden?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional).
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.
 - [Free text, 1200 characters]

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

E.1 Background

As set out in the published guidance, on Strategy, People and Research Environment ([paragraph 4.0.1.](#)), sub-panels and the institution-level SPRE panel will be provided with quantitative data on research doctoral degrees awarded and external research income to inform the assessment of Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) at unit and institution-level. This data was previously known as REF4a (doctoral degrees) and REF4b (research income) and remains aligned to definitions used in the HESA student and HESA or OfS (as applicable) finance returns. In REF 2021, this covered all seven years of the assessment period (2013/14 to 2019/20).

For submission at unit level, institutions are required to provide data on doctoral degrees and research income allocated as appropriate to the relevant REF UoAs they are submitting in. To support institutions' submission of these data in previous exercises, the REF team has provided the data collected by HESA (or the OfS, for research income for institutions in England) by year for all but the final year of the assessment period due to the unavailability of that year's data at the necessary point in time. For the final year of the period (which was 2019-20 in REF 2021), institutions therefore needed to complete the data for submission based on their own data sources. The figures were then verified by the REF team following submission when the HESA data was available.

E.2 Proposed approach

We are proposing an amendment that removes the requirement to submit the final year of data for the assessment period, so that institutions are not required to source, prepare or reconcile data from their own data sources. This will reduce burden on HEIs in preparing their submissions and reduce burden in reconciliation with HESA data once available.

Under this proposal, SPRE quantitative data on doctoral degrees and research income (formerly REF4a and 4b) would be required for all years of the assessment period up to and including the penultimate year (years 2020/21 to 2026/27). The final year, 2027/28, would be removed from the requirement entirely: it would not be collected separately from institutions, and no alternative or provisional figure would be required in its place. It is envisioned that this year of data could be provided for a future research assessment.

This mirrors the approach already adopted for the REF 2029 volume measure, where the final year of the assessment period is excluded from the calculation because the relevant HESA data will not be confirmed in time to be used reliably. The requirement for doctoral degrees and research income data to align with HESA definitions, and to be subject to system verification limits, would be unchanged for all remaining years.

Income-in-kind (formerly REF4c, compiled from non-HESA sources) is being discontinued with panel consent as it was noted in 2021 that the mechanism was not reliable enough to produce robust data. Income-in-kind is still valued as an indicator for the income, infrastructure and facilities section of the SPRE template and submitting units whose research relies on income-in-kind are encouraged to report it as part of their SPRE statement.

E.3 Questions on section E

- Do you agree with the proposal to remove the final year of SPRE quantitative data (doctoral degrees and research income) from the submission requirement?
 - Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question

- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional)
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.
 - [Free text, 1200 characters]

Section F - 100-word statement for engineering

F.1 Background

In REF 2021 Sub-panel 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. The REF team are seeking further views on the provision of these statements to fully evidence the case for their inclusion within or omission from submissions.

F.2 Proposal

For REF 2029, Sub-panel 12: Engineering proposes to continue inviting factual information about significance (maximum 100 words) for outputs that could include, for example, additional evidence about how an output has gained recognition, impacted the state of the art, led to further developments, or has been applied.

HEIs would be instructed to ensure that such evidence is succinct and verifiable. Where claims are made relating to the industrial significance of the output information to support verification of the claim should be stated, for example, the position and company of an industrialist, with contact details for the individual to be supplied in the event of audit. Information provided must not comprise a synopsis of the output a volunteered opinion as to the quality of the output or citation data, and information provided that is of this nature will be disregarded.

In most cases, it is envisaged that a short statement will not need to be provided.

There is no proposal for the 100-word statement on factual information about significance to be included for submissions to any other sub-panel.

F.3 Questions on section F

- Do you work at an institution planning to submit to UoA 12 - Engineering?
 - Yes
 - No
 - Undecided
 - Not applicable/skip question
- Do you agree with the proposal for an optional 100-word statement for outputs in UoA 12 on factual information about significance?

- Strongly agree
 - Agree
 - Neither agree nor disagree
 - Disagree
 - Strongly disagree
 - Not sure
 - Skip question
- Additional comments on the proposed approach (optional)
 - Please do not provide personal or identifiable data (including data that can identify you or others when used alongside other data). By submitting any personal data, you consent to it being held and processed by the REF Team and the four funding bodies until the publication of the anonymised summary of the survey. Where you provide personal data relating to another individual, you confirm that you have obtained their consent for its submission and processing for this purpose.
 - [Free text, 1200 characters]

Thank you

Thank you for taking the time to submit your response to the REF 2029 survey on final policy developments.