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Research Excellence Framework 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation



Research Excellence Framework 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation

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Summary:	Announcement of the initial decisions on the high-level design of the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) and issues for further consultation
FAO:	Principals of Scotland's universities, and the general public
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Research Excellence Framework 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation

Purpose

1. This document announces publication of the initial decisions on the high-level design of the next Research Excellence Framework (REF) and issues for further consultation. Consultation responses should be made by noon on 6 October 2023.

Background

2. The Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP) was launched by the four UK higher education funding bodies 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.
3. Over the last two years, FRAP conducted wide consultation with the sector (including roundtable events and two written consultations) and commissioned a number of evidence reports and analyses. We have also sought expert advice, through an international advisory group, chaired by Sir Peter Gluckman, and a review of the use of metrics, led by Professor James Wilsdon.

Initial decisions document

4. We are now publishing the [initial decisions of the funding bodies](#) on the high-level design of the next assessment exercise here.
5. Taken together, the changes expand our definition of research excellence and ensure that appropriate recognition is given to the people, culture and environments that underpin a vibrant and sustainable research system. Building on changes made in the previous exercise, REF 2028 will be a more inclusive research assessment exercise, capturing the valuable contributions of a wider range of research and research-enabling staff. Changes to the three assessment elements will allow REF 2028 to recognise and reward a broader range of research outputs, activities and impacts, and reward those institutions that strive to create a positive research culture and nurture their research and research-enabling staff.
6. These decisions respond to the key drivers for change that have emerged from the evaluation and consultation activities. They take into account wider research policies

and developments across the UK and its nations. We have also taken into account the evolving international landscape on research assessment.

7. Further evidence and discussion are required on some aspects of the framework before the funding bodies can take final decisions. Some of these will be pursued through a short, focused consultation (see Annex B of the Initial Decisions document) 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. Further consultation on the detailed guidance on submissions and panel criteria will take place in 2024.

Summary of decisions

8. The next national assessment exercise will be conducted in 2028, with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) making their submissions in late 2027. As in REF 2021, assessment will be undertaken by an expert sub-panel for each Unit of Assessment (UOA), working under the guidance of four broader main panels. 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.
9. 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, and the weightings between elements have been rebalanced to increase the emphasis on research culture, people and environment. The three elements and their weightings will be:
 - People, Culture and Environment (25%). 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%). This element expands the outputs element of REF 2014 and 2021. The assessment will continue to be largely the assessment of submitted outputs. In REF 2028, however, at least 10% of this 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%). 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.

10. 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; HEIs 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. There will be a pilot year for collection of this data to ensure robustness.
11. 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 who contribute to the volume measure. In REF 2028 there will not be any minimum or maximum contributions by 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

12. 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 B of the Initial Decisions document). Please respond to the consultation via [link] by noon on 6 October 2023.

Further information

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