

Update on the Research Assessment Framework 2021

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Why assess research excellence in UK universities?

- One of the drivers of the success in UK university-based research is the provision of both competitive grant funding for proposed future research projects and programmes and a long-term, stable block grant that allows universities to invest strategically in research in ways which foster its future development.
- This is 'dual support' system. Both investment streams must focus the limited resources of Government on excellent research.
- Quality Related 'QR' funding, which is awarded annually to each participating university, is largely focussed on strong evidence of excellence in past research performance. That means examining carefully what use universities and research institutions have made of their resources in terms of the assessed excellence of their research.
- This is the justification for a research excellence framework (REF).

League Tables



UNIVERSITY		RESEARCH EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK (REF) 2014					OVERALL RANKING OF INSTITUTION	
UNIVERSITY	REF 2014	4*	3*	2*	1*	REF 2014	OVERALL RANKING OF INSTITUTION	
1	1	100	0	0	0	1	1	
2	2	95	5	0	0	2	2	
3	3	90	10	0	0	3	3	
4	4	85	15	0	0	4	4	
5	5	80	20	0	0	5	5	
6	6	75	25	0	0	6	6	
7	7	70	30	0	0	7	7	
8	8	65	35	0	0	8	8	
9	9	60	40	0	0	9	9	
10	10	55	45	0	0	10	10	
11	11	50	50	0	0	11	11	
12	12	45	55	0	0	12	12	
13	13	40	60	0	0	13	13	
14	14	35	65	0	0	14	14	
15	15	30	70	0	0	15	15	
16	16	25	75	0	0	16	16	
17	17	20	80	0	0	17	17	
18	18	15	85	0	0	18	18	
19	19	10	90	0	0	19	19	
20	20	5	95	0	0	20	20	

Rank 2014	Institution	GPA
1	Institute of Cancer Research	3.87
2	London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine	3.74
3	Imperial College London	3.68
4	St George's, University of London	3.64
5	Cardiff University	3.61
6	Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine	3.57
7	University College London	3.54
8	King's College London	3.52
9	University of Oxford	3.51
10	University of Bristol	3.50
10	London School of Economics	3.50

Original data from Helix; GPA calculation by Times Higher Education

Chemical Engineering

Rank 2015	University Name	Entry Standards	Student Satisfaction	Research Quality	Graduate Prospects	Overall Score
1	Cambridge	439	4.05	3.68	36	100
2	Imperial College London	109	4.17	3.34	30	98
3	Bristol	125	4.08	3.30	12	97
4	Bath	498	4.43	3.08	38	96
5	Sheffield Hallam	481	4.10	3.23	30	95
6	Leeds	461	4.44	3.14	30	94
7	Sheffield	414	4.06	3.11	34	93
8	Nottingham	187	3.91	3.01	30	92
9	Birmingham	438	4.16	2.99	34	91
10	Edinburgh	491	3.67	3.20	68	90
11	Lancaster	429	3.96	3.06	36	89
12	Nottingham Trent	432	4.20	3.20	36	88
13	Cardiff	417	4.16	3.31	38	87

Assessment of research in UK universities: a brief re-cap

1986: The first exercise of assessing of research in Higher Education in the UK took place under the Margaret Thatcher Government. It was conducted by the University Grants Committee. The purpose of the exercise was to determine the allocation of funding to UK Universities at a time of tight budgetary restrictions. The committee received submissions of research statements from 37 subject areas ("cost centres") within Universities, along with five selected research outputs. It issued quality rankings labelled "outstanding", "above average", "average" or "below average". The research funding allocated to Universities (called "quality-related" funding) depended on the quality ratings of the subject areas.

1989 under the name "research selectivity exercise" by the Universities Funding Council. Considered two research outputs submitted per every member of staff. The evaluation was expanded to 152 subject areas ("units of assessment"). Only about 40 per cent of the research-related funding was allocated based on the assessment of the submissions. The rest was allocated based on staff and student numbers and research grant income.

Assessment of research in UK universities: a brief re-cap

1992: the distinction between Universities and Polytechnics was abolished. The Universities Funding Council was replaced by funding councils in the regions. The research assessment needed to become much more robust and rigorous. This led to the institution of the Research Assessment Exercise in 1992. The results of the 1992 results were nevertheless challenged in Court by the Institute of Dental Surgery and the judge warned that the system had to become more transparent. The assessment panels in the subsequent exercises had to be much more explicit about the criteria for evaluation and the working methods.

1996: all volume-based evaluation was removed to account for the criticism that volume rather than quality was rewarded.

1992: exercise stipulated that the staff submitted for assessment had to be in post by a specific date (census date) in order to counter the criticisms that the staff that had moved on were still counted in the assessment. This led to the phenomenon of "poaching" of highly qualified staff by other Universities ahead of the census date. In the 2001 exercise, the credit for the staff that moved institutions in the middle of the cycle could be shared between the two institutions. In the 2008 exercise, this was abolished.

2008: Instead of a single grade for an entire subject area ("unit of assessment"), a grade was assigned to each research output. This was done to counter the criticism that large departments were able to hide a "very long tail" of lesser work and still get high ratings and, conversely, excellent staff in low-graded departments were unable to receive adequate funding. Thus the single grades for units of assessment were replaced by "quality profiles," which indicated the proportion of each department's research against each quality category.

Assessment of research in UK universities: a brief re-cap

- **2014:** the research assessment exercise is replaced by the Research Excellence Framework. The REF is undertaken by the four UK higher education funding bodies: [Research England](#), the [Scottish Funding Council](#) (SFC), the [Higher Education Funding Council for Wales](#) (HEFCW), and the [Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland](#) (DfE).

Key aims for the framework:

- to produce robust UK-wide indicators of research excellence for all disciplines which can be used to benchmark quality against international standards and to drive the funding for research
- to provide a basis for distributing funding primarily by reference to research excellence, and to fund excellent research in all its forms wherever it is found
- to reduce significantly the administrative burden on institutions in comparison to the RAE
- to avoid creating any undesirable behavioural incentives
- to promote equality and diversity
- to provide a stable framework for our continuing support of a world-leading research base within HE

Major review of the national assessment of research excellence

REF2021

Following the decision to protect the £4.7 billion annual science and research budget in real terms during the previous Parliament, in December 2015 the then Universities and Science Minister Jo Johnson launched a UK-wide review of university research funding to cut red tape so that universities can focus more on delivering the world-leading research for which the UK is renowned.

The review of the REF was chaired by the President of the British Academy and former World Bank Chief Economist Lord Nicholas Stern and the outcome 'Building on success and learning from experience', was published in July 2016.

Principles proposed by Stern for the management of the research assessment process

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- Lower burden on HEIs and Panels
- Less game playing
- Less personalisation and more institutionally focused (less emphasis on individuals)
- HEI recognition for investment
- More rounded view of research activity
- Interdisciplinary emphasis
- Broaden impact
- Develop public engagement further to include impact on curricula and/or pedagogy

Report made 12 recommendations on the process

Expert panels

- 34 sub-panels working under the guidance of four main panels with advice from Equality and Diversity and Interdisciplinary Research advisory panels (EDAP and IDAP)

Two-stage appointment process (via nominations):

1. Criteria-setting phase – sufficient members appointed to ensure each sub-panel has appropriate expertise
2. Assessment phase – recruitment in 2020 of additional panel members and assessors to ensure appropriate breadth of expertise and number of panel members necessary for the assessment phase, informed by the survey of institutions' submission intentions in 2019.

Expert panels

Main panel responsibilities

- Developing the panel criteria and working methods
- Ensuring adherence to the criteria/procedures and consistent application of the overall assessment standards
- Signing off the outcomes

Sub-panel responsibilities

- Contributing to the main panel criteria and working methods
- Assessing submissions and recommending the outcomes

Key documents for REF 2021

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[‘Guidance on submissions’](#) (REF 2019/01) details how UK universities should make their submissions to REF 2021

[‘Panel criteria and working methods’](#) (REF 2019/02) describes how the REF 2021 panels will assess this research.

[‘Guidance on codes of practice’](#) (REF 2019/03)

[Draft Guidance and Criteria on Institutional Level Environment Pilot’](#) (April 2019)

Interdisciplinary advisers

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- Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel
 - oversee application of agreed principles and processes
- Main panel interdisciplinary leads
 - facilitate cross-panel liaison
 - oversee calibration exercise for IDR outputs
- Sub-panel interdisciplinary advisers
 - At least two per sub-panel
 - Offer guidance to sub-panels on assessment of IDR outputs
 - Liaise with advisers on other panels

Equality measures in REF 2021

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- The REF Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel (EDAP) has been established to advise the UK higher education funding bodies, the REF team and the REF panels on the implementation of equality measures in the REF 2021.
- Each institution making a submission is required to develop, document and apply a code of practice on the fair and transparent identification of staff with significant responsibility for research (where a higher education institute (HEI) is not submitting 100 per cent of Category A eligible staff); determining who is an independent researcher; and the selection of outputs, including approaches to supporting staff with circumstances.
- Both as employers and public bodies, HEIs need to ensure that their REF procedures do not discriminate unlawfully against, or otherwise have the effect of harassing or victimising individuals because of age, disability, gender identity, marriage and civil partnership, race, religion or belief, sex or sexual orientation or because they are pregnant or have recently given birth. In addition, in Northern Ireland, HEIs must ensure that their procedures do not discriminate on the grounds of political opinion

Biomedical Sciences: Which Unit of Assessment?

- [Panel criteria and working methods](#)' (REF 2019/02) Two UoAs refer to the Biomedical Sciences in their descriptors:

UoA 3 Allied Health, Nursing, Dentistry and Pharmacy

..... 'The UOA includes research into all aspects of the disciplines of allied health professions, dentistry, nursing, midwifery and pharmacy. Its boundaries include research in underpinning science, laboratory-based work, applied clinical research, healthcare technologies, and research into public health, social care and health promotion.....

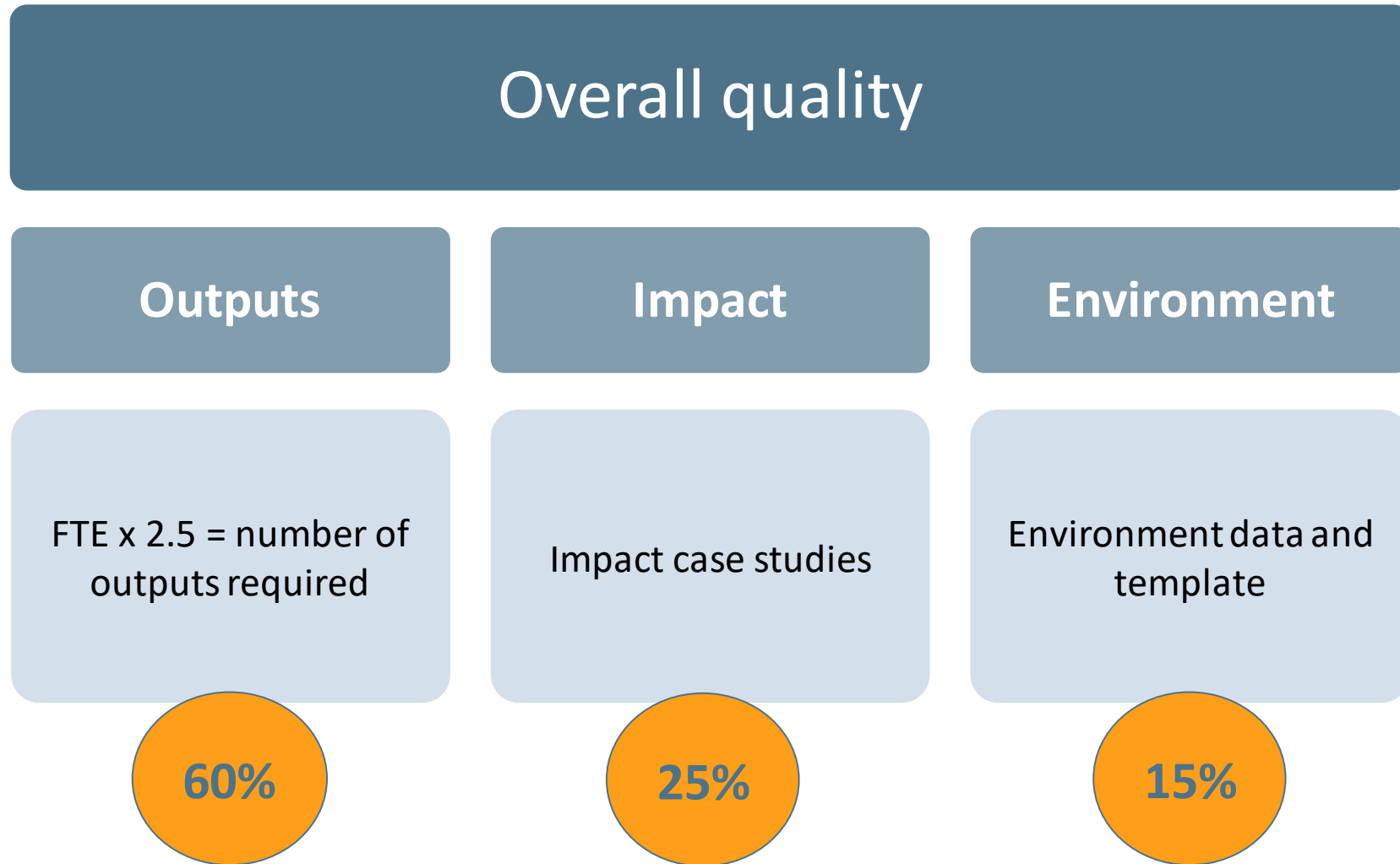
For allied health professions submitted research is expected to underpin clinical practice and policy development and implementation, and includes research in biomedical and nutritional sciences, dietetics, biology of health and disease, vision sciences, optometry, orthoptics, osteopathy, operating department practitioners, diagnostic imaging, therapeutic radiography, audiology, podiatry, occupational therapy, physiotherapy, speech and language therapy, clinical linguistics, paramedics, prosthetics/orthotics, music therapy, drama therapy and arts therapy.....'

UoA 5 Biological Sciences

..... 'The UOA also covers all aspects of the biomedical sciences, including biochemistry, physiology, pharmacology and anatomy at the genetic, molecular, cellular, organ system and whole organism level. It includes work relevant to the nervous and cardiovascular systems at all levels of enquiry.'

2021 framework

REF2021



Independent researchers

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- ‘An individual who undertakes self-directed research, rather than carrying out another individual’s research programme’
- Research assistants / associates not normally eligible
- GOS includes generic indicators, including:
 - Being named as principal investigator
 - Holding an independently won, competitively awarded fellowship where research independence is a requirement. (List at www.ref.ac.uk/guidance)
 - Leading a research group or a substantial or specialised work package.

Staff in non-UK based units

REF2021

- Staff employed by the UK HEI and based outside the UK will be eligible **if the primary focus of their research activity on the census date is clearly and directly connected to the submitting unit based in the UK.**
- HEIs should use guidance on demonstrating a substantive connection to help determine whether they are eligible
- Eligible staff should be returned to HESA.

Substantive connection

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- Statement required for staff on 0.20-0.29 FTE
 - evidence of participation in and contribution to the unit's research environment
 - evidence of wider involvement in the institution
 - evidence of research activity focused in the institution
 - period of time with the institution
- Statement not required where particular personal and discipline-related circumstances apply

Outputs

REF2021

Assessed against three criteria:

- **Originality** - the extent to which the output makes an important and innovative contribution to understanding and knowledge in the field
- **Significance** - the extent to which the work has influenced, or has the capacity to influence, knowledge and scholarly thought, or the development and understanding of policy and/or practice
- **Rigour** - the extent to which the work demonstrates intellectual coherence and integrity, and adopts robust and appropriate concepts, analyses, theories and methodologies

Scored one to four star (or unclassified)

- Each main panel sets out its own understanding of the starred quality levels

Outputs – interdisciplinary research

REF2021

- For the purposes of the REF, interdisciplinary research is understood to achieve outcomes (including new approaches) that could not be achieved within the framework of a single discipline. Interdisciplinary research features significant interaction between two or more disciplines and/or moves beyond established disciplinary foundations in applying or integrating research approaches from other disciplines.
- HEIs are invited to identify outputs that meet this definition. This process is **distinct from** a request for cross-referral.
- There will be **no advantage or disadvantage** in the assessment in identifying outputs as interdisciplinary.
- No penalty for incorrectly identifying outputs as interdisciplinary (or not).

Outputs – co-authored

REF2021

- Institutions may only attribute co-authored outputs to individual members of staff who made a **substantial research contribution** to the output
- Main Panel A: For each submitted co-authored output where there are **fifteen or more** authors and where the submitted member of staff is not identified as the lead or corresponding author, institutions are required to affirm the substantial contribution to the research by the submitted member of staff.

Outputs – co-authored

REF2021

- Can HEIs should be able to submit an output more than once in a submission to a UOA?

Main Panels A-C will not permit this

Main Panel D will permit submission **up to two times**.

- Such outputs may make up max. 5% of submission.
- Cannot be combined with double-weighting

Outputs – version

REF2021

- HEIs submitting outputs of former staff must submit the version that was made publicly available when they were employed by that institution – can be version made available during employment *or* final version

Outputs – double-weighting

REF2021

- All main panels will require a statement to accompany **all** double-weighting requests
- Expectation that most books will warrant double-weighting BUT this is not automatic

Outputs – open access

- Outputs deposited as soon after the point of acceptance as possible, and **no later than three months** after this date from 1 April 2018.
- Deposit exception from 1 April 2018 – outputs remain compliant if they are deposited up to three months after the date of publication.
- Additional flexibility – 5% tolerance band (**or one output**) per submission to a UOA



Consistency with REF 2014

- Impact remains non-portable
- 2* quality threshold
- Timeframe:
 - 1 January 2000 - 31 December 2020 for underpinning research
 - 1 August 2013 - 31 July 2020 for impacts

Refinements

- Impact template integrated into Environment statement
- Impact on teaching *within* (and beyond) own HEI is eligible
- Enhanced clarity on scope of underpinning research – bodies of work
- Guidance on submitting continued impact case studies
- Enhanced guidance on public engagement

Impact – criteria

REF2021

Assessed against two criteria:

- **Reach** - the extent and/or diversity of the beneficiaries of the impact, as relevant to the nature of the impact. Reach will be assessed in terms of the extent to which the potential constituencies, number or groups of beneficiaries have been reached; it will not be assessed in purely geographic terms, nor in terms of absolute numbers of beneficiaries. The criteria will be applied wherever the impact occurred, regardless of geography or location, and whether in the UK or abroad.
- **Significance** - the degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the performance, policies, practices, products, services, understanding, awareness or wellbeing of the beneficiaries.

Impact – continued case studies

REF2021

- Case studies continued from examples submitted to REF 2014 are eligible provided they meet the eligibility criteria

Main Panel A supplementary criteria – continued case studies

231. Main Panel A will assess each case study on merit and wishes to receive information on how any continued case study relates to that submitted in REF 2014. Panel members will have access to the REF 2014 database¹ and may refer to this to understand the context of the 2021 case study.

Main Panels B, C and D supplementary criteria – continued case studies

232. The sub-panels will assess each case study on merit and do not wish to receive information on how any continued case study relates to that submitted to REF 2014. If any such information is provided, the sub-panels will not take it into account during the assessment process.

Impact – underpinning research

REF2021

- Panels recognise that the relationship between research and impact can be indirect and non-linear
- Underpinning research as a whole must be min. 2* quality
- Case studies must include up to six key references
- Can also include indicators of quality e.g. evidence of peer-reviewed funding, prizes or awards for individual outputs etc.
- May be a body of work produced over a number of years or may be the output(s) of a particular project
- Must be produced by someone working at the HEI within the scope of the UOA descriptor
 - Does not need to be a Category A eligible staff member
 - Impact case study can be returned to different UOA from the outputs that underpin it

Environment

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Assessment criteria:

- **Vitality** - the extent to which a unit supports a thriving and inclusive research culture for all staff and research students, that is based on a clearly articulated strategy.
- **Research and enabling its impact** - is engaged with the national and international research and user communities and is able to attract excellent postgraduate and postdoctoral researchers.
- **Sustainability** - the extent to which the research environment ensures the future health, diversity, well-being and wider contribution of the unit and the discipline(s), including investment in people and in infrastructure.

Environment template

REF2021

Sections

- a. Unit context, research and impact strategy.
- b. People, including:
 - a. staffing strategy and staff development
 - b. research students
 - c. equality and diversity.
- c. Income, infrastructure and facilities.
- d. Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society.

Increased emphasis on equality and diversity (not limited to 'People')

Environment template

REF2021

Weighting

- Main Panel A, B and C will attach equal weighting to each of the four sections
- Recognising the primary role that people play as the key resource in the arts and humanities, Main Panel D will attach differential weight to sections:
 - Unit context and structure, research and impact strategy (25%)
 - People (30%)
 - Income, infrastructure and facilities (20%)
 - Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society (25%)

Institutional level assessment of environment

REF2021

- Institutional-level information will be appended to the UOA-level environment template and will be taken into account by the sub-panel when assessing the unit-level statement.
- Pilot of the standalone assessment of the discrete institutional-level environment will draw on this submitted information.
- Outcomes from the separate pilot exercise will **not** be included in REF 2021 but will inform future research assessment.
- Increase in word limit to min. 4,000 words.
- Further guidance and criteria to be published in summer 2019 following consultation.

Timetable for REF 2021

REF2021

- September 2017 Publication of 'Initial decisions on the Research Excellence Framework' by the funding bodies, following consultation on implementation of the Stern review recommendations (REF 2017/01)
- October 2017 Publication of 'Roles and recruitment of expert panels' (REF 2017/03) November 2017 Publication of 'Decisions on staff and outputs' (2017/04)
- March 2018 Panel membership for criteria phase announced
- End of July 2018 Publication of 'Guidance on submissions' and 'Panel criteria'
- 15 October 2018 Close of consultation on draft 'Guidance on submissions' and 'Panel criteria'
- January 2019 Publication of final 'Guidance on submissions' and 'Panel criteria'
- Spring/summer 2019 Institutions intending to make submissions to the REF submit their codes of practice; invitation to request multiple submissions, case studies requiring security clearance, and exceptions to submission for small units; beta versions of the submission system will be available in both test and live environments for institutions to use
- Autumn 2019 Pilot of the REF submission system; survey of submissions intentions opens; proposed date for inviting reduction requests for staff circumstances (the deadline is proposed for March 2020)
- December 2019 Survey of submissions intentions complete; deadline for requests for multiple submissions, case studies requiring security clearance, and exceptions to submission for small units; publication of approved codes of practice
- Early 2020 Formal release of the submission systems and accompanying technical guidance; invitation to HEIs to make submissions; invitation to nominate panel members and assessors for the assessment phase; deadline for staff circumstances requests Mid 2020 Appointment of additional members and assessors to panels
- 31 July 2020 Census date for staff; end of assessment period (for research impacts, the research environment, and data about research income and research doctoral degrees awarded) 27 November 2020 Closing date for submissions
- 31 December 2020 End of publication period (cut-off point for publication of research outputs, and for outputs underpinning impact case studies) Throughout 2021 Panels assess submissions
- December 2021 Publication of outcomes
- Spring 2022 Publication of submissions, panel overview reports and subprofiles

Further information

- www.ref.ac.uk (includes all relevant documents and FAQs)
- Enquiries from staff at HEIs should be directed to their nominated institutional contact (available at www.ref.ac.uk/contact)
- Other enquiries to info@ref.ac.uk