

Research Excellence Framework 2028: Issues for Further Consultation Following Initial Decisions

Qu's 1-4 are administrative questions.

Volume Measure

The funding bodies propose to draw staff data directly from HESA to calculate the volume measure, using an average staff FTE over Academic Years (AYs) 25/26 and 26/27 (piloted in AY 24/25) (Annex A, paragraphs 4-7).

5. What practical challenges may institutions face in implementing these changes?

Answer: This will require a fuller set of REF-related fields in the HESA return, for a greater number of years, than previously required; and it increases the pressure on HEIs regarding the accuracy and completeness of their HESA data.

It may reduce the flexibility of HEIs to strategically align staff members with specific UoAs in a dynamic way that is responsive to changing circumstances, whatever point in the REF period they arise.

However, we support these changes as preferable to the previous approach of using a relatively arbitrary staff census date.

6. How might funding bodies mitigate against these challenges:

Answer: Ensuring that individual alignments to UoAs is allowed to change between reporting years, without requiring additional explanations, would help to mitigate potential downsides here.

7. What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups?

Answer: We consider that the removal of the staff census date (as used in REF2021) is likely to have a moderate positive impact, since it helps to avoid potential distorting effects on institutional and individual career planning from the use of a single census date, which inevitably must always be somewhat arbitrary.

Avoiding the use of a single census date may help to avoid 'game playing' that could disadvantage individuals with protected characteristics, or in underrepresented groups, where these face prejudice or biased views about the quality of their work.

Output Submission

The funding bodies propose to fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions (Annex A, paragraphs 12-18).

8. What would be the impact of these changes on individual researchers and particularly those with protected characteristics or other underrepresented groups?

Answer: The removal of a minimum of one, or any standard number, of outputs to be associated with an individual staff member may encourage institutions to submit what they perceive as the highest-quality outputs without appropriate regard for how they represent the profile of staff in a given unit, and this could have negative effects on under-represented groups. However, this could be mitigated by requiring units to explain how their submitted outputs reflect the diversity of the staff in the unit, and by reporting on how they reflect the contribution of individuals with protected characteristics.

Such mitigation mechanisms are more likely to be effective if there is a clear link between making a diverse and reasonably representative submission and positive credit in the assessment.

The reduced importance of the individual author's contract type for the submission of a given output potentially gives institutions additional flexibility, which could help the submission of underrepresented groups, including those in precarious positions or with a non-traditional pathway of employment. On the other hand, this flexibility could slightly dilute the imperative for institutions to ensure that such individuals are on appropriate contracts that support the long-term inclusivity of the research environment.

Overall, provided the situation is appropriately managed to avoid or mitigate perverse incentives, and to positively promote inclusivity and diversity as being visibly rewarded in the assessment, the breaking of the link between individual staff members and unit submissions should not have unacceptably negative consequences for under-represented groups and those with protected characteristics.

9. What impact would these changes have on institutions in preparing output submissions? For example, what may be the unintended consequences of allowing the submission of outputs produced by those on non-academic or teaching-only contracts?

Answer: The flexibility introduced by these changes could be helpful in allowing institutions to undertake relatively unconstrained strategic planning around their submission, making use of the best material each unit has produced.

We do not yet have total clarity on 'portability' and how the relationship between the output and the submitting institution is to be determined and/or verified. We strongly advocate for a straightforward and unambiguous approach to be adopted on this issue, otherwise significant new complexity could be introduced. Ambiguity on output eligibility rules has the potential to lead to outputs being unclassified through accident, omission or misunderstanding.

Institutions may need to manage a bigger dataset due to the broader pool of outputs becoming eligible. This has the potential to increase complexity, though arguably it might reduce it, by requiring less differentiation on the basis of the author's contract.

It is very likely that submission of outputs by individuals who do not hold contracts involving significant responsibility for research will generate some calls from institutions, the individuals involved, the unions, or pressure groups for contractual changes to be implemented where this situation arises. One colleague in a departmental management role has expressed a concern that 'this could exacerbate potentially exploitative practices in which staff members with no contractual responsibility for research (i.e. who are paid to deliver teaching and associated duties full-time) are passively encouraged (if not officially expected or enabled) to pursue research activity in their own time (or squeeze it into work time, to the detriment of their contracted work), in order to contribute to a unit's pool of potentially REF-submissible outputs.'

There is also a likelihood of divergence in approach to this issue between and possibly also within HEIs, which is in turn likely to further extend debate over the situation. While we do not suggest that these considerations should prevent the REF from adopting the approach most aligned with the principles of the exercise, we do highlight the fact that REF will not be treated within the sector as separate from these other issues.

10. Should outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students be eligible for submission? If so, should this include PhD theses?

Answer: We believe published outputs sole-authored by postgraduate research students should be eligible for submission. They are valued products of the research environment in which the postgraduate researcher is based (and sometimes of direct institutional investment) and so there is no obvious reason of principle against their inclusion. This would also create a helpful extra incentive for institutions to invest in postgraduate research training; and making all such outputs eligible for REF submission would be helpfully inclusive, for example by avoiding any differentiation of treatment based on a PGR's funding source or status.

However, we suggest that this should *not* extend to making doctoral theses eligible for submission in their own right. (Books, articles and other outputs that represent all or part of a thesis should be eligible.) Doctoral theses occupy a slightly different place in the research ecosystem than other outputs, and we do not consider it appropriate to treat them as the same as other outputs in this respect.

A colleague with a departmental management role has expressed this concern: 'If PhD thesis review incorporated REF output criteria and grading, this could limit and skew the nature of the work and outputs, and inadvertently encourage doctoral researchers to extend their study in order to 'perfect' their work into a REF-able shape. This, in turn, would have implications on supervisors and doctoral support within universities, as well as adding extra pressure to doctoral candidates themselves. The examination criteria for a theses do not match up with the REF standards of assessment. We therefore particularly concerned that including them will lead to low-risk admissions policies, which will disproportionately impact marginalised scholars, innovative and interdisciplinary projects. This could also move us closer to an expectation of publication prior to completion as a norm, which it already is in some disciplines, but not in all.'

In practice, it is unlikely in at least some UoAs that the majority of PhD theses would be considered of suitable quality for potential submission, and so their eligibility might not make a significant difference, but we do not see that there is a strong case for it. Their inclusion could become regarded as a mark of achievement, even if only for a tiny proportion of postgraduate researchers, and it is not clear that this would be a healthy or useful incentive within the research culture.

11. What would be appropriate indicators of a demonstrable and substantive link to the submitting institution?

Answer: Although the individual's contract at the time of the publication date has long been used for this purpose, it may be time to re-think this, especially if 'portability' of outputs is disallowed for REF2028. It has long been clear that a contractual relationship on the date of publication is a fairly arbitrary standard that will often not give credit to the institution that actually supported the underpinning research, or even necessarily the writing up of the output. 'Portability' gave a level of flexibility that mitigated the perversity of this position, but without such portability the arbitrariness of this approach is probably no longer acceptable.

Institutional affiliation cited on the output seems like a reasonable and widely-understood alternative indicator to use. It is not absolutely robust as a means of giving institutional credit, but it is likely to be somewhat less arbitrary than using an individual's place of employment on the publication date.

12. Do the proposed arrangements for co-authored outputs strike the right balance between supporting collaboration and ensuring that assessment focuses on the work of the unit?

Answer: Yes, this approach worked well in REF2021 and strikes the right balance. We support the proposal to sustain this approach for REF2028.

13. Are there any further considerations around co-authored outputs that need be taken into account?

Answer: The arrangements for co-authored outputs in REF2021 generally worked well and we encourage them to be sustained. We do have, as a legacy of REF2021 experiences, some concerns around the risks for institutions from inadvertently submitting an output submitted to a previous REF by a co-author's institution, and would encourage either a more accommodating approach to be adopted, and/or the functionality to check the relevant data to be built into the submission system's validation checks.

Impact Case Studies

14. What will be the impact of reducing the minimum number to one?

Answer: This will be helpful in reducing the pressure on small unit submissions to submit multiple examples of very well-developed impacts, which can be challenging for a very small number of staff managing a number of research, impact, and teaching priorities. Small units may, however, have a range of impacts and engagement activities of more modest reach and significance, which could be recognized through the impact statement. We therefore welcome this proposal.

15. What will be the impact of revising the thresholds between case study requirements?

Answer: These revisions seem sensible and appropriate, when considered alongside the introduction of the impact statement. Together they give an opportunity for units that have fewer impacts of exceptional reach and significance, but many impacts and engagement activities of modest reach and significance that collectively add up to a very valuable contribution, to gain recognition for that contribution.

16. To what extent do you support weighting the impact statement on a sliding scale in proportion to the number of case studies submitted?

Answer: This appears to make logical sense, since units submitting a greater number of case studies will already be demonstrating the breadth of their impacts to some extent, while units submitting only one, two or three case studies can gain credit for their breadth by demonstrating it in the impact statement. We support this.

Unit of Assessment

17. If the UOA structure is relevant to you/your organisation, please indicate clearly any changes that you propose to the UOA structure and provide your rationale and any evidence to support your proposal.

Answer: We are happy with the UoA structure as proposed and find it helpful that there is continuity from REF2021 in this respect, which is helpful for long-term strategic planning.

Impact of the Covid-19 Pandemic

18. What is your view on the proposed measures to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

Answer: These seem sensible. We do not consider that there is a case for these measures to be significantly expanded.

19. What other measures should the funding bodies consider to take into account the impact of the Covid pandemic?

Answer: Particularly severe impacts of the Covid pandemic could be included as one of a range of optional issues to be covered by any EDI explanatory narrative. A question on them could be integrated into the People, Culture and Environment section and this may be preferable to requiring a standalone statement.

[Final two questions relate to use of the Welsh language in REF – no opinion]