Lunch with Impact

Navigating the next Research Excellence Framework (REF 2029) assessment

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UNIVERSITY OF BATH

Overview

1. Introduction to the Research Excellence Framework (REF)

2. REF 2029: what we know so far and what we don't

3. Our University preparations: what we have done to date, our plans and next steps in 2025/2026

4. Signposting to further information

5. Q&A and Discussion

What is REF?

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the UK's system for assessing the excellence and impact of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs).

It is carried out about every 6-8 years to:

- Inform the allocation of block-grant research funding to HEIs based on research quality

- Provide accountability for public investment in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment

- Provide insights into the health of research in HEIs in the UK.

The last two REFs were REF 2014 and REF 2021.

The next REF will be **REF 2029**, with HEIs expected to make submissions in **autumn 2028**, and results published in winter 2029.

Why REF matters - Reputation

REF itself does not rank HEIs, but all UK HEIs are directly ranked on measures based on REF quality profiles at institutional and discipline level (e.g. Times Higher Education).

Measures based on REF quality profiles feed into some UK league tables, which in turn influence reputation, staff and student recruitment (e.g. Complete University Guide).

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/ref-2021-research-excellence-framework-results-announced

Rank	Institution	No. UoAs	GPA	GPA 2014	GPA 2014 rank	Research power (indexed)	RP rank	Market share (%)
21	Lancaster University	17	3.37	3.15	=18	255	25	1.3
22	Cardiff University	23	3.36	3.27	6	397	14	2.01
=23	University of Leeds	28	3.35	3.13	=21	475	8	2.42
=23	University of Exeter	26	3.35	3.08	30	352	18	1.81
=25	University of Nottingham	29	3.34	3.09	=26	483	7	2.43
=25	University of Liverpool	23	3.34	3.06	=33	344	19	1.71
=25	Durham University	24	3.34	3.14	20	299	20	1.5
=28	University of Bath	14	3.31	3.17	=14	213	28	1.02
=28	University of St Andrews	21	3.31	3.13	=21	185	36	0.9
=30	Loughborough University	16	3.3	2.95	=49	249	26	1.19

Why REF matters - Funding

REF outcomes are used to inform the allocation of around £2 billion per year of quality-related research (QR) funding to HEIs from the four UK funding bodies.

The University of Bath received **>£16 million in 2025/26** in mainstream QR, which is solely based of REF 2021 outcomes, and a further £8 million in additional QR.

Quality-related research (QR) funds	
Mainstream QR funds (£)	16,221,458
London weighting on mainstream QR (£)	0
Mainstream QR funds including London weighting (£)	16,221,458
QR charity support fund (£)	1,268,194
QR business research element (£)	726,344
QR RDP supervision funds (£)	5,852,243
QR funding for National Research Libraries (£)	0
Total QR funding (£)	24,068,239

What is a REF submission?

For the purposes of the REF, research is defined as:

"a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared"

In each REF cycle, UK HEIs are invited by the four funding bodies to demonstrate the excellence and impact of the research undertaken over the previous 6-8 years by submitting:

- A specified number of research outputs (publications and other forms)

- A specified number of evidenced case studies that show the impact from research (impact case studies)

- Narrative statement(s) and data to showcase the environment and culture for research and impact, including support for people.

HEIs can choose to make REF submissions in one or more disciplinary areas.

To be allowed to make submissions, HEIs must have an approved REF Code of Practice.

Who evaluates submissions

REF is a peer-review exercise carried out by 34 expert panels, each covering a different disciplinary area. The panels are also known as Units of Assessment (UoA).

Panels are made up of academics from UK HEIs, users of research, international and interdisciplinary advisors, impact and culture specialists.

The following University of Bath staff have been appointed to the REF 2029 panels:

- 12: Engineering - Prof. Sarah Hainsworth
- 17: Business and Management Studies - Prof. Martyna Śliwa
- 19: Politics and International Studies - Prof. David Galbreath
- 23: Anthropology and Development Studies - Prof. Joe Devine
- Advisor to all Science and Engineering panels (7 to 12) - Dr Jane Hallett.

How submissions are evaluated

The panels assess the submitted material and form a quality profile for each of the three components.

Quality profiles indicate the proportion of each submission considered to be:

- 'world-leading' (4*)
- 'internationally excellent' (3*)
- 'recognized internationally' (2*)
- 'recognised nationally' (1*)
- 'unclassified' (U).

Currently, HEIs only receive funding for the proportion of research evaluated as 4* or 3*.

Our REF 2021 submissions

In REF 2021, the University of Bath made submissions to 14 out of 34 UoAs:

3: Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy

4: Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience

5: Biological Sciences

8: Chemistry

9: Physics

10: Mathematical Sciences

11: Computer Science and Informatics

12: Engineering

16: Economics and Econometrics

17: Business and Management Studies

19: Politics and International Studies

20: Social Work and Social Policy

23: Education

24: Sports and Exercise Science, Leisure and Tourism

Our REF 2021 results

At an institutional level:

- Overall, 92% of the University of Bath research submitted to REF 2021 achieved the two highest classifications of 'world leading' (4*) or 'internationally excellent' (3*), with 40% achieving 4*.

- 90% of the University's research outputs submitted to REF 2021 were rated 4* or 3* for originality, significance and rigour.

- In terms of the impact of the University's research beyond academia, 93% of the impact case studies were rated 4* or 3* for reach and significance – with Bath research achieving impact across 6 continents.

- In terms of having an environment that supports research and enables impact, 98% was rated as 4* or 3* for vitality and sustainability.

What we know about REF 2029

- REF 2029 represents a fundamental shift away from the assessment of the outputs of individuals to assessment across an institution or disciplinary area.

- **HEIs will not submit staff lists to REF 2029.**

- The number of outputs and impact case studies required for submission will be determined from a proxy measure of research capacity.

- The research capacity measure will be derived by the funding bodies from the data that HEIs return in their annual HESA staff records in the 25/26 and 26/27 academic years.

Terminology and weightings

The funding bodies have developed and published draft guidance for REF 2029 in a modular fashion, starting in 2023 with the REF 2029 Initial Decisions.

The three components assessed in previous REFs have been re-named and re-weighted:

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU) - formerly outputs

- Currently counts for 50% of overall profile (was 60%).

Engagement and Impact (E&I) - formerly impact

- Counts for 25% of overall profile (no change).

People, Culture and Environment (PCE) – formerly environment

- Currently counts for 25% of the overall profile (was 15%)

What is still to be decided

Many policy decisions are still to be confirmed, with the full draft guidance not expected to be published until 2026.

Engagement and Impact (E&I) - formerly impact

- The draft guidance on Engagement and Impact has been delayed.

People, Culture and Environment (PCE) – formerly environment

- Research England ran a pilot exercise in November 2024 to June 2025 to determine what is feasible. The University of Bath was one of 40 institutions to be invited to participate.
- A separate project was commissioned to look at indicators and data requirements.
- Both are yet to report and little is known about the details for PCE.

Timetable and the 'pause'

In September, the UK Science Minister announced a 3-month pause to the publication of guidance for REF 2029 to consider opportunities to simplify, streamline and reduce burden on the sector.

Any changes that result from the pause are expected to be published in December 2025. Outstanding draft guidance* is expected shortly after.

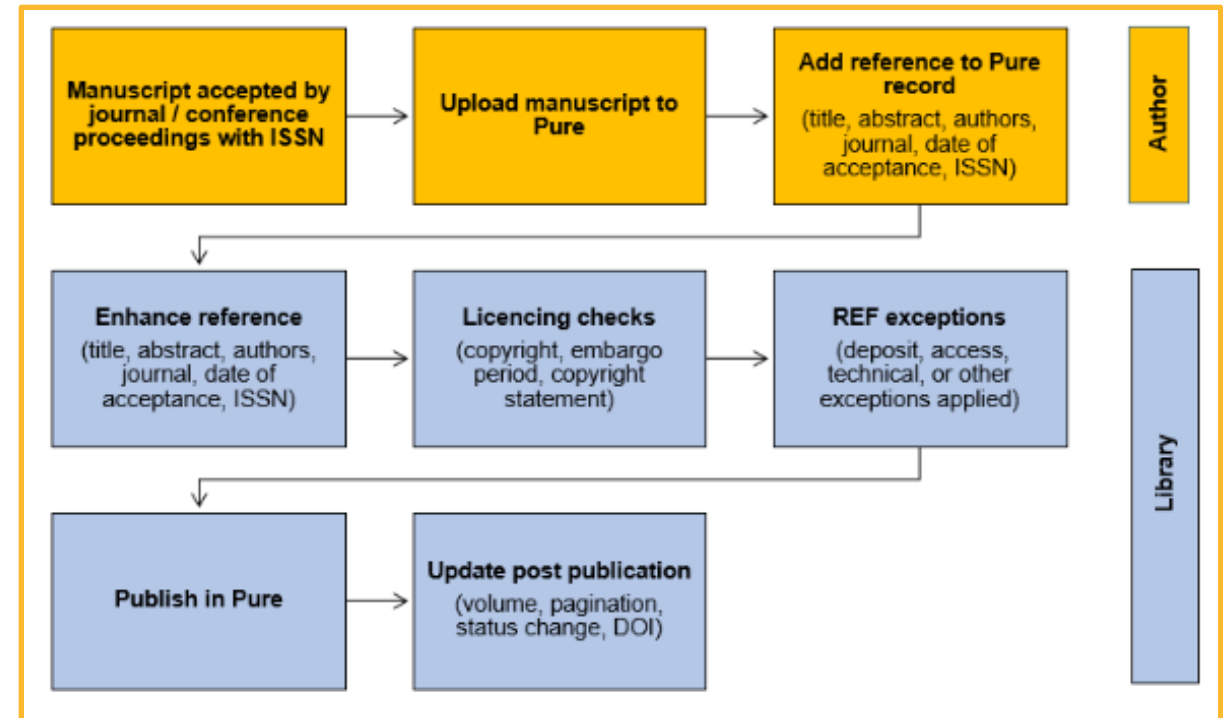| 2023	Initial Decisions
Spring 2024	Consultation exercises and Further decisions
Winter 2024/25	Open Access Policy published ; Volume Measure and Code of Practice guidance published
Summer 2025	CKU Guidance published
Winter 2025	Engagement and Impact Guidance published – expected December 2025* PCE Guidance published – expected December 2025*
2026	Publish full final guidance
Spring 2027	Submission intentions survey deadline
Autumn 2027	Staff HESA returns determining staff volume for REF 2029
Autumn 2028	Staff HESA returns determining staff volume for REF 2029
Nov 2028	Submission deadline
Dec 2029	Results published

CKU (outputs)

- Assessment of the contribution the HEI has made to knowledge and understanding within a specific disciplinary area.

- Assessed through peer review of:
  - Outputs e.g. journal articles, abstracts, books, software, patents, artifacts etc.
  - Narrative statement – contribution to disciplines (pending further guidance).

- Assessment criteria: originality, significance and rigour.

- Outputs must have been first made publicly available during the years 2021 to 2028.

- HEIs may return outputs produced by any staff with a 'substantive link' to the HEI, demonstrated through an eligible employment relationship, meaning that outputs published before joining the University of Bath may not be submitted.

- Outputs sole-authored by staff on teaching-only contracts or PGRs may not be submitted.

Open Access requirements

Journal articles and conference contributions that have an International Standard Serial Number (ISSN) and were published between 01 January 2021 and 31 December 2028 are in-scope of the REF OA policy.

There are no open access requirements for longform outputs – this will come into effect in the next exercise.

What you can do (outputs)

- Focus on the production of high-quality outputs – this may mean prioritising quality rather than quantity of outputs.

- Understand what originality, significance and rigour mean within your discipline and seek to write in a way that encapsulates this – this may be especially important within an abstract or summary section. Internal peer review may help.

- Ensure that outputs are appropriately affiliated to the University of Bath, and that any author contribution statements (e.g. CRediT taxonomy) reflect your entire contribution.

- On acceptance for publication, ensure that outputs are uploaded to Pure, and follow all steps to ensure that they are Open Access compliant if in-scope.

- If asked as part of an internal REF audit, review your own outputs against the criteria and nominate those you consider as highest quality – note, not applicable to all Departments.

Engagement and impact

- Defined as "any identifiable benefit or positive influence on the economy, society, public policy or services, cultures, the environment and quality of life, beyond academia".

- Assessed through peer review of:
  - Impact Case Studies (ICS)
  - Narrative Statement – wider contribution of disciplines research to society

- Assessment criteria: reach and significance (and potentially rigour - pending confirmation).

- Impact needs to have been realised between 01 August 2021 and 31 July 2028 (exact dates pending confirmation).

- The research than underpins the impact needs to have been conducted by staff at the University of Bath and first made publicly available during the years 2008 to 2028 (pending confirmation).

What makes an excellent ICS

- ICS tell your story of change (impact) in a compelling and relatable way to the audience and clearly show the link between research and its impact – the golden thread.

- Clearly set out:
  - Context: What was the problem your research was addressing?
  - Impact: What difference did your research make to the problem?
  - Process: How did your research deliver the impact?

- Be specific:
  - Qualify and Quantify your significance, reach (and rigour – pending confirmation)
  - Who, where, when, why, how many, how much.

- Provide evidence of Impact
  - Consider multiple sources of qualitative and quantitative data and provide the strongest evidence.

What you can do (impact)

- For new research projects:
  - Build impact and impact generating activities (such as knowledge exchange, engagement and dissemination) early into your research design.

- For existing research or completed research (published 2008 onwards):
  - Ensure you have an impact plan in place to deliver and help you to accelerate and evidence your impact
  - Record your activities, outputs, outcomes and impact into PURE along the way.

- Engage with the Research Impact Team who can provide you with advice, signpost you to appropriate resources, and help you to plan and evidence your impact.

- Familiarise yourself with what 'world-leading' (4*) looks like. Review a selection of ICS from highly-rated submissions submitted to the REF 2021 (https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact).

University of Bath preparations

Progress and activity to date:

- Established REF Strategy Steering Group, chaired by Prof. Sarah Hainsworth.

- Developed ambitious targets for REF 2029 through benchmarking to improve performance.

- Responded to consultations and took part in PCE workshops and pilots.

- Undertook REF audit exercises in 2022/23, 2023/24, 2024/25, focussing on outputs and impact case studies.

- Identified priority areas for support.

- Secured additional funding to support impact development and delivery.

- Secured additional funding for external validation of our internal output review ratings.

Internal audit review 2025/26

Launch of the audit review for 2025/26 (October 2025).

Between October 2025 and March 2026, Faculties/School will co-ordinate:

- internal reviews of eligible outputs
- the drafting of impact case studies
- self-assessment of research culture.

In May 2026, internal panels will consider the outcomes of the internal audit and next steps for preparations.

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)	Faculty/School and UoA led peer review of eligible research outputs against criteria. **Action:** Please ensure your outputs are on PURE!
Engagement and Impact (E&I)	Drafting of REF Impact Case Studies. **Action:** Keep an eye out of updates and events – ICS writing retreats planned for November and February
People, Culture and Environment (PCE)	Self assessment of position against Research Culture Priority areas. **Action:** Keep an eye out for updates and events.

REF 2029 Code of Practice

- All HEIs are required to submit a Code of Practice to the relevant funding body for approval no later than Spring 2026.

- Codes of Practice outline how HEIs will make key decisions about submissions to REF 2029, including identifying contracts that contribute to the REF volume measure, and selecting research outputs for submission.

- Codes must embed a set of principles to demonstrate robustness, transparency and equity and inclusion throughout processes and decision-making.

- Processes outlined in Codes need to be consulted on with staff, using appropriate staff representation mechanisms.

- Details on the University of Bath Code of Practice consultation will be published shortly.

Resources

- REF 2029 website – this is where to find the official guidance that the Funding Bodies have published to date - https://www.ref.ac.uk/

- You can also signup to a REF alert to your email via the REF 2029 website.

- REF 2021 and REF 2014 information is still available – https://2021.ref.ac.uk/ includes results and databases of the Impact Case Studies submitted.

- The University of Bath REF website – this is where we host internal guidance - https://www.bath.ac.uk/guides/research-excellence-framework-ref/

- Information about Open Access for REF 2029 is available via the Library - https://library.bath.ac.uk/open-access/openaccessandtheref

- Or contact the REF Team on ref@bath.ac.uk

Summary

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3. Our University preparations: what we have done to date, our plans and next steps in 2025/2026

4. Signposting to further information

Now time for:

5. Q&A and Discussion

Questions and feedback

If you have any unanswered questions, please don't hesitate to contact us: ref@bath.ac.uk

We would also love your feedback on how to make this session better in future:

https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/lwi-ref2029