

## What is REF?

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) – formerly Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) – is an internationally recognised system for assessing the quality of research in UK Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Run by the four UK HE funding bodies<sup>1</sup>, the exercise is carried out every 6/7 years and the results determine the amount of funding received by each HEI.

In 2018/19, the SFC allocated £247m of research block funding to Scottish institutions, supporting a research portfolio of around £800m grants and contracts across the Scottish sector.

There are 4 main panels and 34 units of assessment which broadly reflect academic disciplines:

Panel A	
1.	Clinical Medicine
2.	Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care
3.	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy
4.	Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience
5.	Biological Sciences
6.	Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences
Panel B	
7.	Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences
8.	Chemistry
9.	Physics
10.	Mathematical Sciences
11.	Computer Science and Informatics
12.	Engineering
Panel C	
13.	Architecture, Built Environment and Planning
14.	Geography and Environmental Studies
15.	Archaeology
16.	Economics and Econometrics
17.	Business and Management Studies
18.	Law
19.	Politics and International Studies
20.	Social Work and Social Policy
21.	Sociology
22.	Anthropology and Development Studies
23.	Education
24.	Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism
Panel D	
25.	Area Studies
26.	Modern Languages and Linguistics
27.	English Language and Literature
28.	History
29.	Classics
30.	Philosophy
31.	Theology and Religious Studies
32.	Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory
33.	Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies
34.	Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

---

<sup>1</sup> (Research England, Scottish Funding Council (SFC), Higher Education Funding Council for Wales (HEFCW), and Department for the Economy, Northern Ireland)

---

## How are REF results used?

REF results are used to:

- Inform the selective allocation of research funding to HEIs from 2022-2023 onwards.
- Provide accountability for public investment in research and demonstrate its benefits.
- Provide benchmarking information and establish the reputation of institutions in research.

In addition the [Stern Review](#) identified further roles fulfilled by the REF:

- Provide a rich evidence base to inform strategic decisions about national research priorities.
- Create a strong performance incentive for HEIs and individual researchers.
- Inform decisions on resource allocation by individual HEIs and other bodies.

## Have there been any changes since REF 2014?

A number of changes occurred following the previous exercise, REF 2014, including:

- The inclusion and submission of all eligible staff with significant responsibility for research employed on the census date (31 July 2020).
- The submission of a pool of outputs for each unit of assessment – the total number of outputs must be equal to 2.5 times the submitted FTE of the unit's submitted staff, with a minimum of one output for each staff member and a maximum of five.
- Returning outputs of former or retired eligible staff and staff<sup>2</sup> who were previously employed as eligible, where the output was first made public during the period of employment/eligibility.
- An open access requirement for journal articles and conference proceedings with an ISSN and a date of acceptance after 1 April 2016.
- A broader definition of impact, to emphasise public engagement and to include impact on teaching.
- The submission of a single institutional environment statement, and the revision of the unit-level environment template to include new elements – see page 4 for more detail.
- Revised weightings of the assessment elements. Outputs 60%, Impact 25%, Environment 15% – see page 3 for more detail.
- Increased focus on interdisciplinary research, which has been defined for REF purposes and which has its own assessment criteria.

---

<sup>2</sup> Rounding to the nearest whole number will be applied to give a whole number of outputs for submission. Values ending in .5 should be rounded up.

---

## How will REF 2021 be graded?

The REF assesses research excellence through a process of peer assessment informed by appropriate indicators. Submissions are graded from 1 – 4 stars reflecting the quality, significance and rigour of the research. Work which falls below the nationally recognised standard is graded as unclassified.

The University invited researchers to propose outputs to REF which were of 3\* quality and above.

4*	Quality that is world leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour
3*	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence
2*	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
1*	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment

## How will REF 2021 be assessed?

REF 2021 consists of 3 main elements – in summary:

Outputs	Impact	Environment
Research publications and other outputs, assessed by peer review	Impact case studies, showcasing research that has produced benefits for research users and wider society	Description of research environment, facilities, E&D arrangements, open access, sustainability and vitality of submitting unit
Minimum 1, maximum 5 per researcher; average 2.5	1 for each unit of assessment + 1 for the first 20 FTE ; + 1 for every further 15 FTE	Narrative
60% of overall outcome	25% of overall outcome	15% of overall outcome

In more detail:

### REF 2 – Outputs

An output is the result of research – for example journal articles, conference proceedings, monographs, book chapters, books, patents, databases, compositions etc.

- Journal articles and conference proceedings with an ISSN must be open access compliant.
- Outputs must have working links (DOIs), or attach electronic copies of articles and book chapters or physical copies of Books.
- Outputs can be single authored or co-authored but must have been produced by the University during the assessment period 1st January 2014 to 31st December 2020.
- Outputs of extended scale and scope can be proposed for double weighting.
- Institutions can submit outputs by former members of staff if the output was published while they were employed at the submitting institution.
- Outputs make up 60% of the assessment.

---

## REF 3 – Impact

Impact is the effect on, change or benefit research makes to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life beyond academia.

- Submitted impact case studies detail the benefits from our research, focussing on its ‘reach’ and ‘significance’, and will be approximately 3 pages of A4.
- Impact must have occurred between 1 August 2013 and 31 December 2020<sup>3</sup> and be underpinned by research published between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2020 which meets the REF criteria of at least 2\*.
- The impact weighting is 25% of the assessment.

## REF 5 – Environment

Environment assesses the ‘vitality and sustainability’ of the research environment, including the approach to enabling impact and contributions to the ‘vitality and sustainability’ of the wider discipline or research base.

- HEIs submitted an institutional level environment statement (REF5a), which includes information on context and mission, strategy, people, and income, infrastructure and facilities.
- HEIs also submitted a completed template describing each submitted unit’s research and impact environment (REF5b). Unit level environment templates include information on research strategy, research facilities, staff development, PGR support, collaboration, and equality and diversity related to the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020.
- Environment narratives draw on quantitative indicators as appropriate, and sub panels use data submitted in REF4a/b/c to inform the environment information.
- Unit-level environment narratives make up the remaining 15% of the assessment.

## What other information was submitted?

### Staff details (REF1a/b)

Information on eligible staff in post on the census date (31 July 2020) (REF1a); and information about former staff to whom submitted outputs are attributed (REF1b).

### Environment data (REF4a/b/c)

Data about research doctoral degrees awarded (REF4a), research income (REF4b) and research income-in-kind (REF4c) related to the period 1 August 2013 to 31 July 2020.

### Staff Circumstances (REF6a/b)

Information on Staff circumstances where a unit reduction or removal of the requirement of the minimum of one output from each staff member was requested. Requests for reductions were submitted to REF in March 2020 in advance of the submission date of 31 March 2021<sup>4</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Due to the impact of Covid-19 Research England announced an extension to the Impact period. The previous impact period end date had been set as 31 July 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Due to the impact of Covid-19 Research England announced a revised submission date. The previous submission date had been set as 27 November 2020

---

## When did we submit?

REF 2021 had a submission date of 31 March 2021. The outcomes are due to be published in April 2022

## What is done with the results?

We will receive a quality profile for each element of assessment (Outputs, Impact, and Environment) and an overall quality profile. The overall quality profile is used by the Scottish Funding Council to calculate the amount of Research Excellence Grant we will receive annually for each unit of assessment until the next REF, likely to take place in 2028.

## How is REF managed by the University?

The Vice Principal for Research, Professor Marion Campbell, is responsible for the institutional REF submission. She works with a small team within Research & Innovation who keep up to date on policy developments and support the systems required for submission. She is supported by the three Deans of Research and the Dean of Graduate School who oversee the preparations for submissions to the main panels relevant to their own research areas.

The REF Steering Group, chaired by the Vice Principal for Research, oversees the preparations and made recommendations on the final submission to senior management and Court.

Heads of School and School Directors of Research identified a lead researcher for each unit of assessment, and a researcher responsible for co-ordinating the impact element of the submission. They are supported by School Administrative Officers.

## Where can I find out more?

For more information please visit the [REF web pages](#).