

## **Assessment of people, culture and environment in REF 2028**

The four UK higher education funding bodies (Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, the Department for the Economy, NI) are inviting views on the assessment of people, culture and environment (PCE) in the Research Excellence Framework 2028 (REF 2028). They invite respondents to outline the challenges and opportunities they see in the changes to PCE assessment announced in the [Initial decisions](#). Respondents are also invited to outline any concerns they may have about this element of REF 2028 and suggest solutions to challenges and concerns identified. Insights from these responses will be used to inform the development of this element of REF 2028.

Responses are invited from any organisation, group or individual with an interest in the conduct, quality, funding or use of research in the UK.

Respondents are requested to complete the box below and provide their comments in no more than two pages (Arial, 11 pt). Completed Word documents should be sent to [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk) by **5pm on 1<sup>st</sup> December 2023**.

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## Information on respondent

Name	Ellie Russell, Deputy Head of Policy, University Alliance
Respondent type	Other: HE mission group

[University Alliance](#) (UA) represents 16 leading professional and technical universities across the UK – a full list of our members can be found [here](#). In this submission we are highlighting some of the common points of concern and agreement across UA members on assessing research culture and environment in REF 2028. There will be nuanced perspectives on these issues amongst UA members, which will be reflected in their own institutional responses.

First and foremost, whilst there is significant work to do to ensure a robust and equitable approach, many UA members are supportive of the intention to expand the definition of research excellence and increase focus on the assessment of People, Culture and Environment (PCE) in REF 2028. [References](#) to reviewing the 25% weighting for PCE (potentially as late as the end of 2024 or early 2025 based on the milestones in the commercial partner [specification](#)) are concerning and at this stage, a majority of UA members would support the funding bodies retaining the initial decision to moderately rebalance the weightings, which is already below the equal 33% split across the three areas recommended by the International Advisory Group.

In our response to the initial decisions consultation, we raised the concern that the lack of a maximum output requirement means some units could submit a selection of outputs that are not fully representative of their staff profiles, which would disadvantage HEIs that invest in a ‘mixed economy’ model of research that includes staff at all career stages. There needs to be enough of a drag factor in the PCE element (or sanctions built in elsewhere) offset the potential GPA gains within the main output element and disincentive this behaviour.

The weightings for the different sections within PCE will be an important part of ensuring that ‘environment’ and ‘culture’ are not conflated. As a minimum there should a three-way split between the sections.

The need to ensure an equitable approach to assessing PCE (and part of the reasoning behind broadening the environment element to include people and culture) is well summarised by the ‘Harnessing the Metric Tide’ review, which noted that the “assessment of research environments will always favour larger, wealthier, more established research-intensive HEIs”. The implications of this are varied and include the ability absorb the administrative burdens of changes in the REF; the need for size-independent metrics; and the need to account for the impact of overconcentration in R&D funding. On the first point, there is a need for more indicators to assess PCE, but this will undoubtedly increase administrative burden, which research-intensive HEIs will have more capacity to absorb. We recognise this is a bind for the funding bodies, but still wish to highlight it as a concern and encourage them to reduce burden wherever possible.

The overconcentration of UK R&D funding has produced a ‘Matthew effect’ where past successes have largely determined future chances. Despite these circumstances, high-quality research and novel approaches occur in [many places](#) outside research-intensive HEIs. A key aspect of designing an equitable PCE assessment should be how to take account of these imbalances, as well as recognising and rewarding dynamism in the sector. The diversity of research grants and income, even if grant applications increasingly take account of research culture during this REF period, is not an appropriate proxy given the impact of

overconcentration. Consideration should be given to whether measures of productivity and value-add produced over time (e.g., research income input by research quality output) can be reflected in the PCE questionnaire.

Additional points from UA members on the PCE statement and the outcomes-focused indicators are as follows:

- The indicators used for research culture will need to be flexible to capture the specific context of each unit and retaining a narrative component in the 'questionnaire-style' statement will be important for providing this context, as will having a range of suggested evidence sources that can be applied as appropriate.
- Care must be taken when defining the indicators to avoid institutions 'chasing' them without positive effects on the environment and culture. For example, including citations in policy literatures, as mentioned in the 'Harnessing the Metric Tide' review, could lead to this. In general, there should not be an overreliance on this review when developing the indicators.
- EDI indicators will be vital. UKRI are planning to expand the annual diversity data they publish on their students to include intersectionality between gender and other characteristics, which should also be considered for the REF PCE indicators.
- The Researcher Development Concordat, which has a more rigorous reporting framework behind it than some other concordats, should be incorporated to utilise data that HEIs are already collecting.
- The impact on smaller units must be considered – for example, some units will be too small to report on gender and ethnicity pay gaps. However, reporting at main panel level (rather than Unit of Assessment or institutional level) would present challenges as they can conflate very different areas of an institution.
- Indicators that rely on data collected through standardised workplace surveys could be a challenge given ongoing, wider industrial relations issues in the HE sector; the need to ensure good response rates in order to provide a reliable dataset; and the need to ensure enough lead in time to add new questions. Consideration should also be given to providing clear guidance on who should complete these surveys given the decoupling of outputs from individuals.
- Guidance to assessors and sub-panellists should make them aware of the differences between institutions funded through Research England and those in the devolved nations. There are differences in funding, government priorities, reporting requirements, demographics, and legislation (e.g., equality legislation in Northern Ireland that differs from elsewhere in the UK), all of which means that institutions in the devolved nations may be collecting a different set of metrics than those in England.

We look forward to engaging further on the issues raised and in the development of the methodological approaches once the commercial partner has been appointed.