

REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

REF 2029

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HoDoMS 1/5/26



What is the Research Excellence Framework?

REF 2021

REF is owned and led by the four UK higher education funding bodies. REF:

- informs allocation of around £2bn of block-grant funding each year
- provides accountability for public investment in research
- continually evolves, alongside our research base
- (given the connection to allocation of funds) inevitably drives behaviour and therefore is a significant policy instrument across the UK



Principles and functions for REF 2029:

1. REF should fulfil the following purposes:

- **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 **insight into the health of research** in HEIs in the UK.

2. REF should underpin:

- A research system that produces **high-quality, rigorous** research that is **open** to all;
- An **inclusive and collaborative** research system that supports a diversity of people, ideas, institutions, methodologies, outputs, and activities; and
- An **engaged and impactful** research system that connects research with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change.

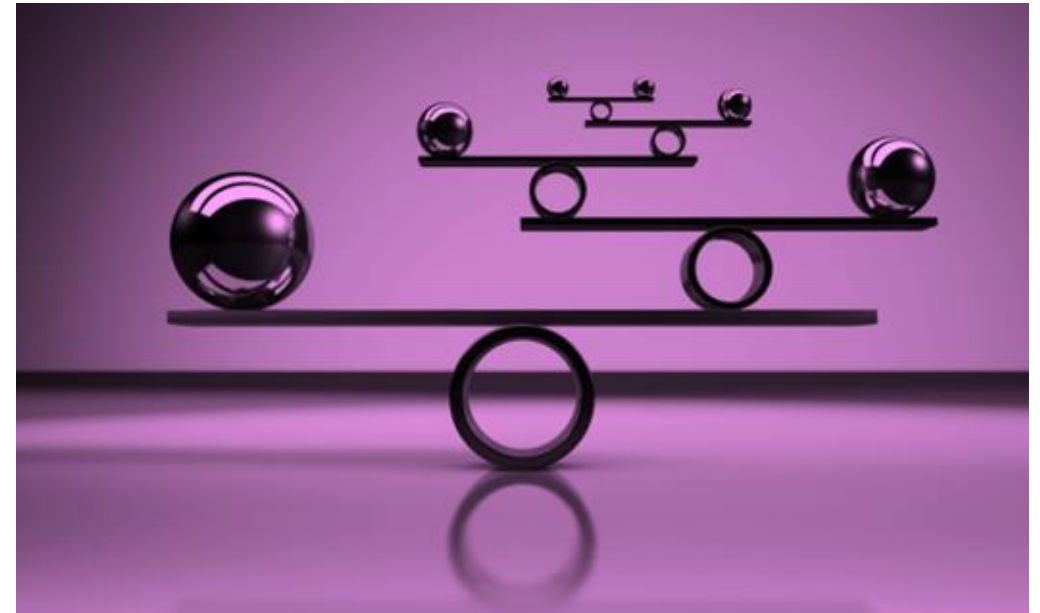
3. REF decision making should be driven by:

- **Robustness** of assessment outcomes
- Impact of the system on **research culture**
- Ensuring that the **bureaucratic burden** of the system is proportionate.

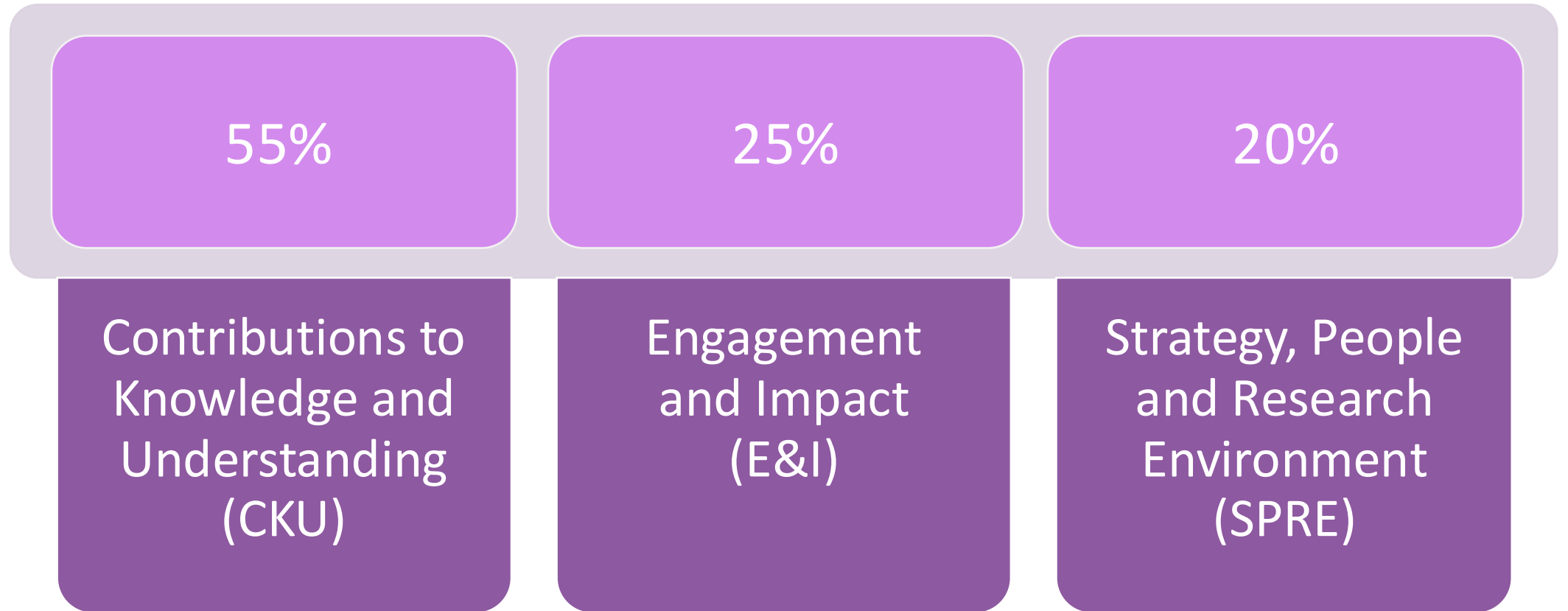
From Initial Decisions published in June 2023.

December 2025 publications and updates

- Weightings confirmed (55, 25, 20)
- Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) guidance and draft templates
- Updates to Contributions to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU) guidance
- Engagement and Impact (E&I) guidance
- An updated timetable
- The People, Culture and Environment Pilot report



Confirmed weightings for REF 2029

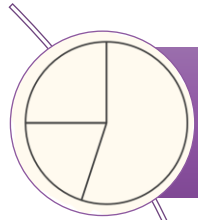


Strategy, People and Research Environment

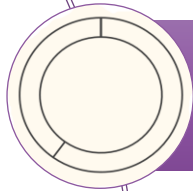


- Celebrates how research strategies enable the building of excellent cultures and research environments.
- Values all people who undertake, enable or support research, engagement and impact
- Encourages sustainable and ethical research practices
- Highlights strong, inclusive environments that enable people to conduct world-class research.

SPRE: Key changes in REF 2029



SPRE profile worth 20% of unit profile



Two assessed statements: Institutional statement worth 60% of SPRE profile, and unit-level worth 40%



Incorporates findings from PCE pilot including encouraging discussion of journey travelled

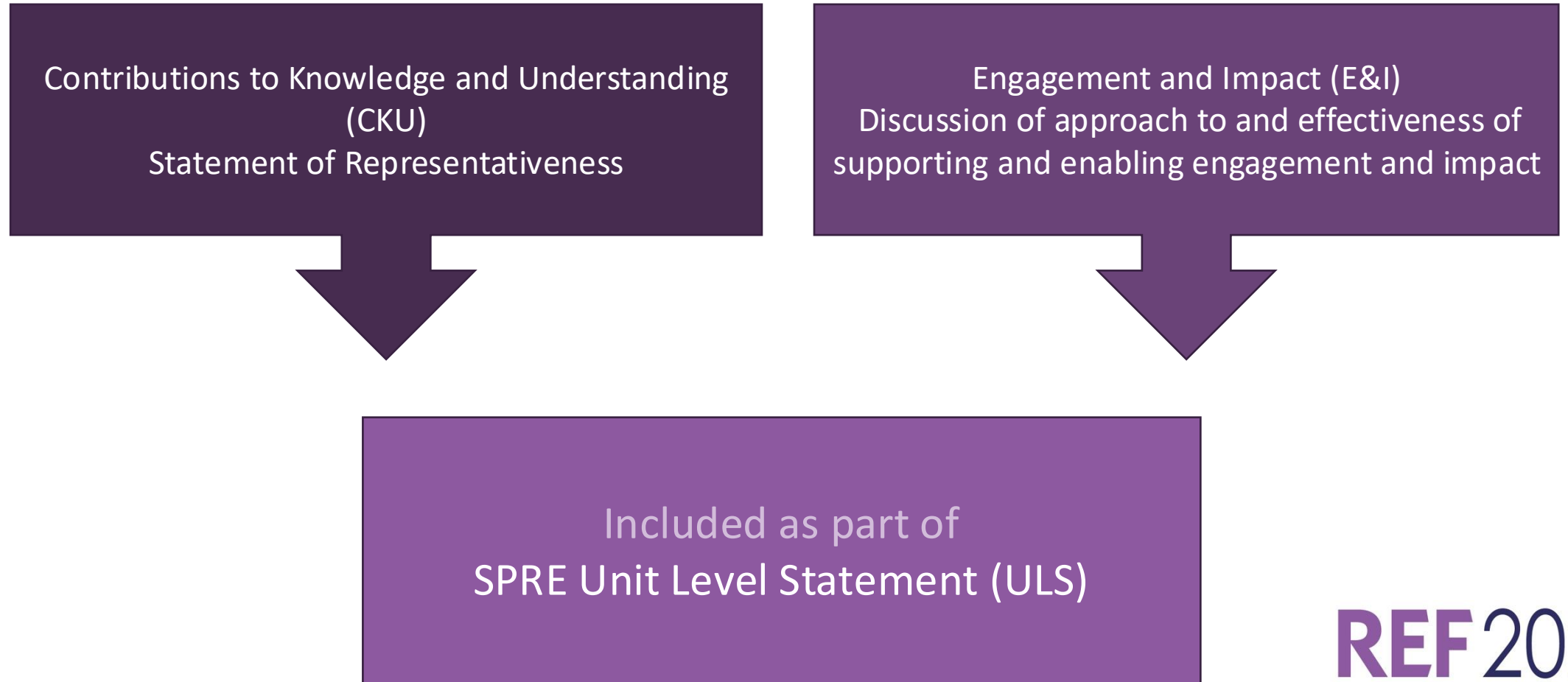


Statement on the Research Community: Roles and Careers



Statement of Representation

Disciplinary statements and representativeness



SPRE: Assessment approach

- SPRE is assessed holistically against two criteria: Vitality and Sustainability
- IL statements will be assessed by an institution-level panel
- UL statements are assessed by the sub-panels
- Qualitative and quantitative data is encouraged to strengthen the narrative
- ‘Distance travelled’ and adaptive strategies can demonstrate excellence
- There is no third criterion, but reflection and journey travelled will be incorporated into vitality and sustainability
- PDAP and RDAP will advise the panels on aspects relating to people and research diversity

Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)

- . Replaces 'Outputs' from REF 2021
- . Guidance module includes rules pertaining to outputs
- . Published June 2025 and updated December 2025

CKU: Key changes from REF 2021

- . Decoupling
- . No collection of staff details
- . Introduction of Substantive Link
- . Removal of minimum and introduction of a recommended maximum
- . New process for Unit reduction requests

Engagement and Impact (E&I)

The engagement and impact profile:

- Captures the wider societal benefits created through research
- Provides accountability for public funds

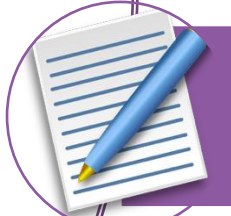
E&I: Key changes in REF 2029



ICS authors are encouraged to discuss engagement strategies and responsible practices



The 2* quality threshold for underpinning research has been removed.









The minimum number of required ICS is reduced to one (but 2 can be submitted)



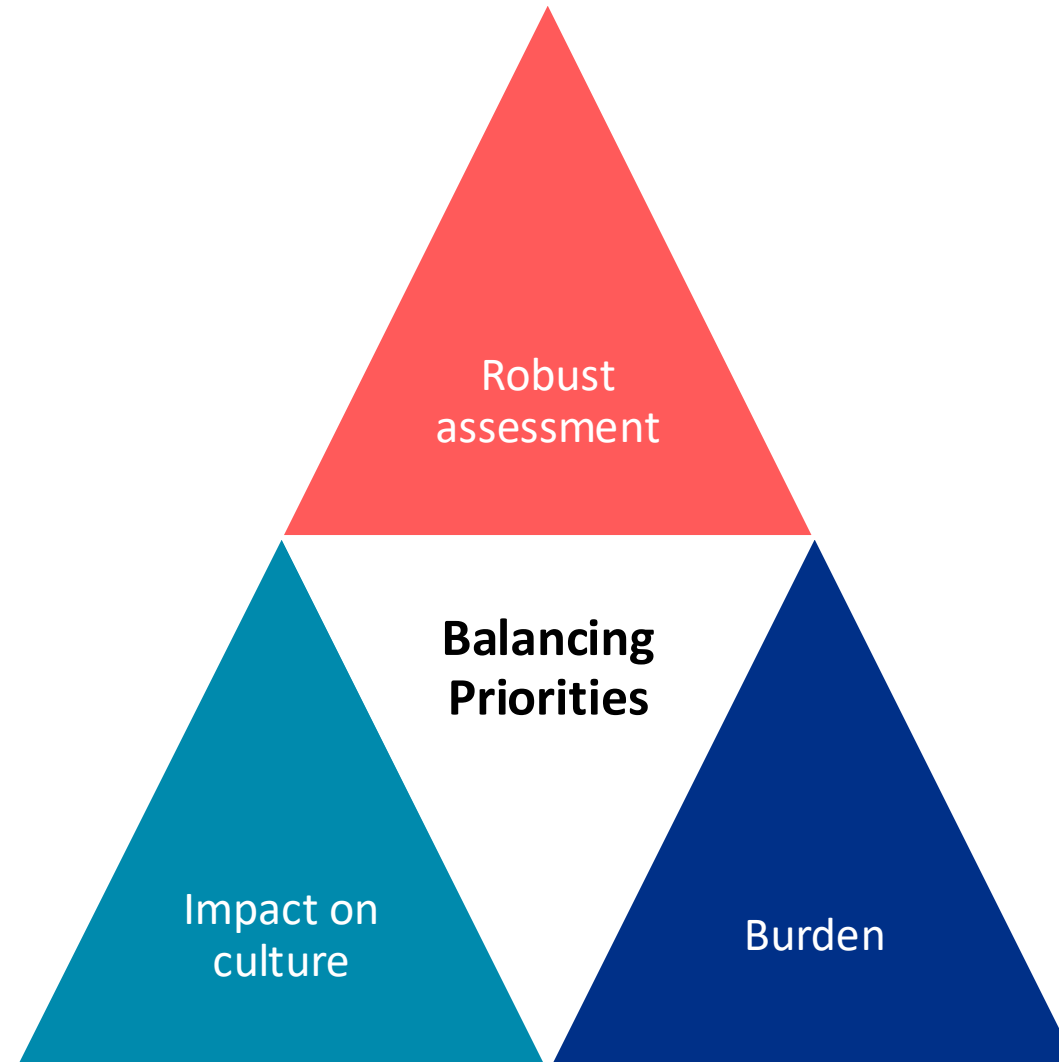
Contributors to engagement and impact can be celebrated through publication of names in the ICS database

The REF 2029 Main and Advisory Panels

			
Professor Louise Kenny CBE	Professor Tom Rodden	Professor Jane Falkingham	Professor Greg Walker
Main Panel A Medicine, Health and Life Sciences	Main Panel B Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics	Main Panel C Social Sciences	Main Panel D Arts and Humanities
Sub-panels 1-6	Sub-panels 7-12	Sub-panels 13-24	Sub-panels 25-34

	
Professor Alis Oancea	Professor Simon Macklin
Chair of the REF 2029 Research Diversity Advisory Panel (RDAP)	Chair of the REF 2029 People and Diversity Advisory Panel (PDAP)

Developing the policy framework



REF2029 next steps

2025

Winter

Weightings confirmed.
PCE Pilot Report published.
Strategy, People and Research Environment guidance published.
Engagement and Impact guidance published.
Updates to Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding guidance.

2026

Spring

Expert panels meet to develop guidance.

Autumn

Final full guidance is set.

Winter

Special requests open.
Publication of SG papers.

2027

Spring

Survey of submission intentions opens.

Summer

Submission intentions and special requests close.

Autumn

Submission window opens.
Additional panel recruitment.

2028

Autumn

Submission deadline.
Assessment phase begins.

2029

Results published (planned for December 2029).

Criteria setting



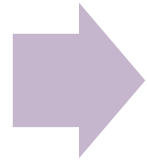
Submissions



Assessment

REF2029 phases

Criteria
setting



Submissions



Assessment

Criteria phase topics under panel consideration

- 1 Unit of Assessment Descriptors and taxonomies
- 2 Long-form and/or extended process exception to the substantive link policy
- 3 Statement on Representation and Statement on Research Community
- 4 Strategy People and Research Environment assessment criteria
- 5 Strategy People and Research Environment unit-level template and indicators
- 6 Strategy People and Research Environment standard quantitative data and analyses
- 7 Interdisciplinary research
- 8 Engagement and Impact introductory text
- 9 Engagement and Impact assessment criteria
- 10 Strategy People and Research Environment institutional-level template and indicators
- 11 AI in submissions and assessment

UoA Descriptors and taxonomies

- All Main Panels agree on the need to revise and update the REF 2021 UoA descriptors to reflect disciplinary evolution and to provide clearer sign-posting for submitting HEIs.
- Standardised disciplinary taxonomies (indicatively 30-50 terms per UoA) are also being created to assist with recruitment for the assessment phase of REF, output allocation and mapping.
- The publication of UoA descriptors is being expedited as far as is possible, to support HEIs to allocate volume to UoAs accurately for year 1 of the included HESA returns.
- Disciplinary taxonomies will also be published to support the submissions process. Where the taxonomy will be published will be part of panel discussions.

Suggested REF 2029 Tier 1 taxonomy

The following is adapted from REF2021 text (adapted by adding categories and somewhat rearranging).

The UOA includes pure and applied mathematics, statistics and operational research, including the development and application of these areas in the study of biological, physical and social sciences, commerce, engineering, finance, government, health, industry, information science, medicine and elsewhere.

Tier 1 (10-15, arranged alphabetically):

Algebra; analysis; combinatorics; continuum mechanics; geometry; modelling; numerical analysis; number theory; probability; statistics;

Suggested REF 2029 Tier 2 taxonomy

- The following is adapted from REF2021 text (adapted by adding categories and somewhat rearranging).

Tier 2 (30-50, arranged alphabetically):

algebra; algebraic geometry; analysis; category theory; combinatorics; complexity theory; continuum mechanics and magnetohydrodynamics; differential equations; differential geometry; dynamical systems and ergodic theory; environmental, financial, geophysical and industrial mathematics; integrable systems; mathematical biology; mathematical logic and foundations; mathematical methods; mathematical aspects of operational research, including optimisation and stochastic modelling; mathematical physics; number theory; numerical analysis and scientific computing; operator theory and operator algebras; probability; Statistics, such as experimental design, mathematical statistics, statistical computing; Mathematical aspects of data science and machine learning; and applications such as biostatistics, environmental, medical and social statistics; quantum theory including string theory; relativity and gravitation; topology.

Suggested REF 2029 taxonomy (disclaimer)

The following is from REF2021 text

This list is necessarily incomplete, and any research in which the primary contribution is mathematical may be considered in this UOA, including experimental, theoretical or computational investigations related to mathematical or statistical models applied in other subject areas. The sub-panel expects submissions in this UOA from all areas of mathematical sciences, as defined above, and expects that the majority of the research activity submitted will have made a direct contribution to the UOA as characterised in the UOA descriptor. The sub-panel welcomes the submission of innovative interdisciplinary research that incorporates mathematical, statistical or operational research content, irrespective of the primary research focus of the medium in which the output is disseminated. It also expects to receive some outputs on the history of mathematical sciences when they incorporate insights into mathematics or statistics. The sub-panel will receive outputs describing purely pedagogic research within higher education and where advice is required from Sub-panel 23 (Education), outputs will be cross-referred. Operational research that is focused on business and management should not normally be submitted in this UOA.

Substantive link policy (Portability)



Limited portability introduced for longform/extended process research outputs for 5 years

Long-form and/or Extended process exception to the Substantive link policy

- There is cross panel agreement on the principle, but a desire to control variation to avoid unintended consequences.
- This exception has been specifically developed following feedback from some disciplines where there is a particular concentration of outputs which would be defined as long-form or extended process, to ensure that REF works to support the diversity of research types.
- Panels are aware of the desire from the sector for clear direction, to ensure that the expectations around the 100 word statement in support of the request to use the exception is clearly articulated to avoid increasing the perception of risk associated with making use of this exception.
- We are not seeking a final list but important input to inform the next stage of panel discussions.

Long-form and/or Extended process exception to the Substantive link policy

- What sort of outputs would your UoA consider long-form and why?
- What sort of research would your UoA consider extended process and why?

Thank you and stay in touch

- Use QR code to sign up for **REF updates** straight to your inbox.
- Please visit **get involved** on our website to view current opportunities.
- Email us at **info@ref.ac.uk** if you have any suggestions about how we can improve our guidance for you.

