

Research Excellence Framework 2028: Issues for further consultation following initial decisions

Submission by: National Centre for
Universities and Business (NCUB)

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National Centre for Universities and Business

DC. 115, The Clarence Centre
6 St George's Circus
London SE1 6FE

T **+44 (0)20 7383 7667**
E **info@ncub.co.uk**
W **www.ncub.co.uk**

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

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

NCUB welcomes the proposal to fully break the link between individual staff members and unit submissions. As noted in the document, Research Excellence Framework 2028: Initial decisions and issues for further consultation (REF 2028/23/01), 'supporting and rewarding a diversity of research outputs is important for the progress of research and its dissemination to diverse audiences' and, 'reaching businesses...requires outputs in different formats.'

In the context of university-business research, the modes and motivations for collaboration may not lend themselves to traditional academic outputs and therefore this can, despite support elsewhere in the system, create a disincentive for researchers to pursue these types of activities. The REF is a significant driver of individual and institutional behaviour. It is acknowledged that REF 2028 will 'recognise and reward a broader range of research outputs.' While it is likely traditional academic outputs will continue to dominate, this expansion should in itself have an ameliorating effect. Breaking the link between individual staff members and unit submissions is a positive move that could help to encourage more researchers to explore collaboration with businesses.

Additionally, qualitative analysis undertaken for NCUB's recently published, Research England endorsed, NCUB Researcher Career Mobility Taskforce 2023 report, 'Pathways to Success', suggests, as described in the document, Research Excellence Framework 2028: Initial decisions and issues for further consultation (REF 2028/23/01), an emphasis on traditional academic outputs, dissuades researchers within academia from exploring mobility into industry and vice versa.

In the longer term, breaking this link may help to 'de-risk' intersectoral mobility. This is valuable as intersectoral mobility can benefit individual researchers through enhanced networks and a broader understanding of the needs, opportunities and applications of their research.

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?

There is scope for a range of unintended consequences. However, in principle allowing for a broader pool of university staff to submit outputs into REF2028 is positive in that it allows for a greater range of submissions and opens opportunities for recognition of those on non-research contracts who may, nonetheless, by conducting valuable research activity at their institutions.

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

It is understood that, at a minimum, this will include 'outputs produced by anyone employed by the institution on a minimum 0.2FTE contract for at least six months in the REF assessment period.' NCUB's aforementioned work on intersectoral mobility, noted the importance of flexible contracts and schemes to facilitating mobility between academia and industry. The inclusion of any additional indicators of 'a demonstrable and substantive link' should be balanced against the need for flexibility.

Impact Case Studies:

The funding bodies propose to reduce the minimum number of impact case studies required to one. They also propose to revise the boundaries, including splitting the lowest boundary (Annex A, paragraph 33-37). The funding bodies are particularly keen to hear the views of institutions with small units.

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

The introduction of the 'Impact' measure in 2014, and the increase in the weighting in 2021, have been beneficial in recognising the 'real world' effects of the research that is undertaken in our universities. This includes collaboration between universities and business, and so NCUB welcome the continued emphasis on impact in REF2028, demonstrated by the 25% weighting afforded to the updated, 'Engagement and impact' element.

In this context, the reduction of the minimum number of impact case studies required from two to one, appears a sensible move that ought, as intended, reduce overall administrative burden for submitting institutions.

Unit of Assessment:

The funding bodies propose to retain the REF 2021 Unit of Assessment structure (Annex B). The funding bodies invite views from disciplinary communities and institutions on any disciplinary developments since REF 2021 that would require changes to be made to the UOA structure.

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.

NCUB has previously worked with other organisations, including the Physiological Society, on the importance of recognition for interdisciplinary research including that which results in non-traditional research outputs. Consequently, we welcome the continued inclusion of the advisory panel on Interdisciplinary research. We propose no specific changes to the REF2021 Unit of Assessment structure but welcome the question and the recognition of the need to regularly review these structures.

Impact of the Covid-19 pandemic:

The funding bodies intend to retain the statements on Covid impact that were used in REF 2021, and to require some consideration of how Covid impacts have been addressed in output selection as part of Codes of Practice.

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

The use of statements on Covid impact in REF2021 alongside an extension to the submission deadline were sensible measures taken in response to a period of uncertainty, stress and real challenge to individuals and institutions.

While the most immediate impacts of the pandemic have now abated, individuals and institutions face ongoing effects. For example, research published by the University Commercialisation and Innovation Policy Evidence Unit jointly with NCUB, suggests a 'disproportionate effect of the pandemic on smaller universities with less research activity.' These effects will impact the research activities of institutions during the period of assessment of REF2028 and so it is right that universities retain the right to explain this in their REF2028 submissions. The retention of a mechanism to do this that is familiar to institutions appears pragmatic.