

Institute of Physics REF2029 Update

Why the REF is important

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is one of the mechanisms used in the UK to allocate research funding to universities. REF assesses the quality of research in UK universities, informing the allocation of Quality-Related (QR) funding, which is awarded not for specific research projects like grant-based funding but instead aims to recognise the overall quality of research produced by a department and enable the department to continue or improve upon that excellence. For research-intensive subjects with comparatively high research costs like physics, this exercise is of particular significance.

The next REF

REF2029 will be the 4th iteration of the framework, informing allocation of around £2 billion per year. Originally slated to run in 2028, it has now been [pushed back](#) to 2029, with a host of consultations being held in the intervening time to help develop the new framework. The IOP has been engaging with these consultations and will continue to do so over the next few years.

Key changes in REF2029 compared to previous versions:

- Increased focus on research culture, environment and activities beyond publications (25% weighting for "People, Culture and Environment", compared to 15% for 'Environment' in REF2021);
- No minimum or maximum requirements for attributing outputs to individual researchers and the removal of requirements to attribute outputs to individuals at all;
- Reduction of the minimum number of impact cases to one.

What the IOP has done

Developed through discussions with the heads of UK university physics departments and in consultation with our publishing arm, the IOP's response to the [first consultation](#) on REF2029 expressed support for the increased focus on inclusivity and the drive to reward good research culture/environment, but pointed out that the specifics require further detailed consultation to avoid unintended consequences like concentrating on research "stars". Further points made include highlighting the need to:

- Ensure measures promote inclusivity without reducing rigour or allowing output quality to slip;
- Address concerns about the use of HESA data as a measure of staff volume;
- Minimize other unintended negative consequences and game-playing, particularly from the severance of the link between individual staff and their outputs;
 - This includes the risk that the detection of repetition becomes more difficult;
- Avoid increasing administrative burden on small departments;
- Ensure UK research remains internationally competitive;

- Address concerns about the assessment of very large, multi-author papers, including those with hundreds or even thousands of authors, to ensure that panels are able to appropriately verify the contributions of each author to these.

This initial consultation was followed by [an open-form feedback exercise](#) on the People, Culture and Environment section. The IOP also responded to this, re-iterating support for the shift in focus towards greater inclusivity but requesting further detail about the specifics of the assessment in order to be able to express a more definitive view.

Next steps

The next REF2029 consultation is expected in January 2024 on the topic of Open Access requirements. UKRI is also expected to publish an updated plan for the [development of REF2029](#) within the same month. The IOP will continue close engagement with this process in the coming years, in consultation with members and other stakeholders. If you have questions or comments about our work on REF2029, please contact policy@iop.org to share your views.