The Research Excellence Framework
What is the UK Research Excellence Framework?

• an assessment of UK universities’ research – 2001, 2008, 2014, 2020...

• In REF2014, 154 UK universities submitted their research in one or more of 36 areas of research, or ‘Units of Assessment’
For REF 2014

52,061 academics had their research evaluated

6,679 impact case studies were submitted

£2 billion per year has been allocated to universities based on performance

See also
http://www.ref.ac.uk/pubs/keyfacts/
What is assessed?

• **Quality of Outputs (65% of overall score in 2014)**
  - e.g. journal publications, monographs
    (possibly more use of metrics next time in some units)

• **Research Environment (15% of overall score in 2014)**
  - e.g. PhD completions, quality of research facilities, research income, research influence as seen by editorship of journals, visiting Professorships etc.

• **Impact (20% in 2014 – probably 25% next time)**
  - The non-academic benefit of research
REF scoring

• 4* = world-leading (30% in 2014)
• 3* = internationally excellent (46% in 2014)
• 2* = internationally recognised (20% in 2014)
• 1* is nationally recognised (3% in 2014)
• Below 1* is unclassified (1% in 2014)
Quality of Outputs

‘Research’ is defined as:
  “a process of investigation leading to new insights effectively shared”

“Scholarship’ is defined as:
  “the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases”

“Initial Decisions on the Research Excellence Framework”
April 2010, Higher Education Funding Councils for England
‘Research’ includes:

- scholarship;
- work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, and the public and voluntary sectors;
- the invention and generation of ideas, images etc. where these lead to new or substantially improved insights;
- the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes.
It excludes:

• routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes
• the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.
Unit of Assessment 25:

Descriptor: Research in education is multi-disciplinary and is closely related to a range of other disciplines with which it shares common interests, methods and approaches. This diversity of content and methodology requires the sub-panel to be flexible in setting out the boundaries of work relevant to the REF.

For UoA 25 there were 22 panel members (mostly professors), 2 observers (from Research Council) and 4 advisors. For details of panels, see [http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/](http://www.ref.ac.uk/panels/)
Concerned with research in:

1. education systems, issues, processes, provision and outcomes,

in sectors such as:

early years, primary, secondary, further, higher, medical, workplace, adult and continuing education

teacher, healthcare and other forms of professional education, vocational training and informal, community and lifelong learning
2. Substantive areas, such as:

- curriculum, pedagogy, assessment,
- language, teaching and learning;
- children, young people, student and adult learners;
- parents, families and communities;
- culture, economy and society;
- teacher training, professionalism and continuing professional development (CPD);
- special and inclusive education;
- participation, rights and equity issues;
- technology-enhanced learning;
- education policy;
- the organisation, governance, management, effectiveness and improvement of educational institutions;
- education, training, workplaces, industry and the labour market;
- comparative, international and development education.
3. In disciplinary traditions, including, but not limited to:

- anthropology,
- applied linguistics,
- economics,
- geography,
- history,
- humanities,
- mathematics,
- statistics,
- philosophy,
- political science,
- psychology,
- science,
- sociology.
submissions in other areas (e.g. healthcare, counselling and neuroscience) will be considered if they have an educational orientation, but may be referred to another sub-panel for advice.
Using qualitative and quantitative methodologies with structured, exploratory and participatory research designs

including, but not limited to:

- surveys, experiments and controlled trials;
- ethnography, interview and narrative enquiry;
- action research and case study;
- evaluation research;
- critical theory and documentary analysis;
- analytic synthesis;
- systematic review.
Outputs:
• 4 single outputs per researcher (fewer for early career researchers and those who took a career break)
• Must be original, significant and rigorous

What about ‘outputs of extended scale and scope’?
• The institution can request up to 2 double weighted outputs per researcher – but should include 4 submissions in case the panel does not accept the request

What about software and datasets?
• Acceptable, but a full written description should be provided in a paper-based format
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**ECR** = Max 4 years since starting employment (at 0.2 FTE or more) involving ‘research’ or ‘teaching and research’ (in the UK or overseas)

Definition not based on a particular job role or job title.
The completion of a PhD is not always a useful indicator of the first point at which an individual undertook independent research.

A research assistant does not normally qualify as an early career researcher (RAs do not conduct ‘independent research’).

Emeritus Professors can be included – if they receive a salary for work which involves research.
A template for output information (original, significant, rigorous)

• Publication details

• Where the research content and/or process is not evident, up to 300 words on research questions, methodology and means of dissemination

• Plus up to 100 words about the significance of the output (But factual, verifiable information relating only to nationally or internationally awarded prestigious prizes or similar)
A template for mock REF reviewers

Author

Title of output

Output type

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Assessment</th>
<th>4*</th>
<th>3*</th>
<th>2*</th>
<th>1*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Originality</td>
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<td>Significance</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rigour</td>
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<tr>
<td>Comments</td>
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Sample comments 1*

• This short paper constitutes a **proposal** for a kind of dictionary entry, ...... Lexicographers have long recognised the desirability of making this sort of information available to learners, but there are many practical difficulties ............

• The paper may serve to introduce these issues to a new readership, but it only marginally constitutes **‘a process of investigation leading to new insights’**. It may therefore fall short of the REF definition for research.
Sample comments 2/3*

- This is an analysis of the affordances for vocabulary learning of the textbook series xxxx.
- The discussion draws on the prior second language vocabulary acquisition literature in a scholarly way, but does not refer to any of the prior studies which have also analysed vocabulary coverage in commercial coursebooks – for example xxxxxxx.
- The study was detailed and rigorous, but no claims are made for the originality of the analytical technique, and the pedagogical implications of the study are not extended beyond those for users of xxxxxxx.
Sample comments 3/4*

• This is a strong contribution which charts complex developments in xxxx, over two decades. The selection, contextualisation and comparison of such a wide range of studies demonstrates considerable scholarship. In identifying their overall contribution to the field the chapter provides new insights and is likely to constitute an important authoritative source for future scholars.
The Research Environment (15%)

The ‘vitality and sustainability’ of the submitted unit, and its contribution to the ‘vitality and sustainability’ of the wider research base.

Considered in terms of:

**Environment data**: Statistics on doctoral degrees awarded and research income.

**Environment template**: Narrative describing the unit's research environment.
**Environment data:**

**Research doctoral degrees awarded** - Number of research doctoral degrees awarded in each academic year (data taken from institution’s annual Student Record return).

**External research Income** - External research income (spend on research grants and contracts) in each academic year (data taken from institution’s annual Financial Statistics return).

**Research Income-in-kind** - Estimated value of Research Council facility time allocated through peer review and used by staff (the Higher Education Funding Council provided institutions with this information).

**Narrative:**

**Overview of research strategy**

**Staffing strategy, staff development, research students**

**Income, infrastructure and facilities**

**Collaboration and contribution to the discipline**
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4*</td>
<td>An environment that is conducive to producing research of world-leading quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3*</td>
<td>An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally excellent quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally recognised quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>An environment that is conducive to producing research of nationally recognised quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>An environment that is not conducive to producing research of nationally recognised quality.</td>
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What about impact?
In REF2020 - 2 case studies per 10 researchers
To be assessed by peers and research users, in terms of significance and reach

In REF2014
Impact case studies were analysed by Digital Science, a division of Macmillan Science & Education, with Nature Publishing Group and the policy institute at King’s College London (co-funded by the UK Funding Bodies, Research Councils UK and Wellcome Trust)
For REF2020, impact case studies must have:

• Underpinning research
  Conducted at the academic’s own university
  Published since approximately 1999
  Of at least 2* quality

• Impact between 1 Jan 2014 (and 2019?)
‘For the purposes of the REF, impact is defined as an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’

i.e. A provable change in the real world, as a result of our research
REF impact is NOT

• The dissemination of research findings
• Visibility / attention to research findings
• Change within your own institution
• Prioritised over excellent research
• Separate from research
REF impact must

• be underpinned by excellent research
• be demonstrated with evidence
• constitute change beyond academia, e.g.
  • Change in policy
  • Increased effectiveness of policy
  • Improved wellbeing of a specified sector of society
  • Reduced costs
• Change in practice at other educational institutions
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4*</td>
<td>Outstanding impacts in terms of their reach and significance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3*</td>
<td>Very considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2*</td>
<td>Considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>1*</td>
<td>Recognised but modest impacts in terms of their reach and significance.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unclassified</td>
<td>Impact of little or no reach and significance; or the impact was not eligible; or impact was not underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitted unit.</td>
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Main types of impact in REF2014 (for Unit 25)

Change in:

• practitioners’ practices, approaches to teaching
• curriculum or training design
• design of professional development for practitioners
• national policy or guidelines by professional bodies
• school’s or authority’s management processes
An Education Case Study might describe the impact of:

- A new teaching tool / method / approach / framework
- Policy recommendations / providing evidence for policy makers
- Recommendations on improving practice
- A variety of outreach activities (conferences, training events, websites) BUT **NB these are not an impact in themselves**
Main beneficiaries in REF2014 case studies (Unit 25)

- Practitioners, head-teachers
- Policy makers, local authorities
- Professional associations
- Parents

- Very few case studies could evidence impact on students
Highest scoring case studies had:

• A clear and compelling narrative linking the research to the claimed impact

• Verifiable evidence (qualitative or quantitative) to support the claimed impact

• (Where appropriate) spread beyond the immediate beneficiaries to a much broader and possibly global audience
They also had:

• Demonstrable real-life impact: change in practitioners practices, curriculum design, policies
• ‘Top’ level reach, international or nation-wide
• Impact on top policy makers or funders
• Impact presented in a thought-through, planned manner
# Impact case study template (one per case study)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Author(s) of the draft case study document:</strong></th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Title of the impact case study:</strong></th>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Underpinning research conducted at CU since January 1999:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>NB Consultancy is not eligible as evidence of underlying research</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Summary (up to 100 words)</th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Completed research (list outputs or other evidence of research):</strong></th>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>CU researchers contributing to the case study:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Summary of actual impact since January 2014 (please include details of nature of change, beneficiaries and evidence available):</strong></th>
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See [http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/rsrch/REFimpact/)

the report on the Impact Case Study analysis
[http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/analysisREFimpact/Title,103621,en.html](http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/Year/2015/analysisREFimpact/Title,103621,en.html)

the Impact Case Study Database
[http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/](http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/)

e.g.
[http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=6369](http://impact.ref.ac.uk/CaseStudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=6369)
Thank you. Any questions?