

REF2029 People, Culture and Environment Indicators - British Academy Response

This document sets out the British Academy's response to the REF2029 People, Culture and Environment (PCE) indicators survey, run by Technopolis UK on behalf of Research England, the Scottish Funding Council, the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research, and the Department for the Economy of Northern Ireland. This survey forms part of a wider consultation on the Research Excellence Framework (REF).¹ As the survey offers limited room for responses, some context is provided below to illustrate the approach that was taken in filling out the survey, including the main principles that informed our response to the survey. This is followed by our submitted response.

Main principles and overview

The British Academy places great importance on research culture and its role in supporting a healthy and thriving research ecosystem. Research culture and the research environment are policy areas that deserve serious attention. In our role as a research funder, and as a voice for our disciplines on issues of research policy, we are committed to supporting initiatives that aim to promote awareness and foster a better understanding of best practice in the sector.

We have been guided by three main principles when completing our response to this survey:

- The allocation of stable, quality-related (QR) funding based on peer review should remain the principal objective of the REF.
- Any new measures that are to be introduced into the REF, quantitative or qualitative, must be robust and have proof of feasibility.
- PCE indicators, where introduced, should be provided as guidance for assessors, in line with the use of indicators and metrics in other aspects of the REF.

Historically, the primary purpose of research assessment exercises in the UK has been to deliver stable tranches of funding to higher education institutions, rewarding excellence wherever it is found. The revenue stream that is determined by the results of this process, quality-related or “QR” funding, is particularly important for the humanities and social sciences, all the more so at a time

¹ More information can be found at [Research Excellence Framework 2029: People, Culture and Environment \(PCE\)](#)

when university budgets are under severe pressure. We strongly believe that this should remain the primary purpose of the REF, and all other objectives fall in line behind this.

To this end, all the elements put forward for consideration in Question 13 of the survey are important for good research culture. However, there is a difference between what is important and what can be appropriately measured or assessed via the REF. For several elements, we have concerns as to whether these can be meaningfully assessed, but it does not mean we believe them to be unimportant elements of a strong and positive research culture. We have indicated this disjoint in our responses to question 17, by highlighting those elements we think are problematic, either because it will be too hard to develop an indicator, or because of the potential negative consequences of measurement.

Using the REF as a mechanism to incentivise good research culture is well-intentioned, but it is an ambitious aim, and we would urge caution in this first phase of implementation, especially in the absence of any evidence of feasibility of the indicators. The scope of elements being considered in this survey is very broad. This is understandable, insofar as this survey represents the initial scoping phase of the development of PCE. Nevertheless, some of the elements under consideration arguably fall outside of the remit of the REF, and their introduction could create more problems than they solve.

Psychological safety and mental health and wellbeing are two examples of this. It is highly questionable that they could be appropriately assessed in the context for the PCE component of the REF as proposed. Certainly, at UoA level, it is hard to see how these could be assessed in ways which did not risk individuals being identifiable, with the risk for further harm. Similarly, there is the potential inadvertently to encourage institutions to underreport matters relevant to these elements, which would have significant negative consequences for both individuals and wider research culture. There is already evidence that fewer than 4 in 10 black early career academics would feel comfortable reporting bullying or harassment, for example.²

In question 15, we have stated a preference for the assessment of several of these indicators to occur at the institutional level. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, Unit of Assessment (UoA) sizes vary considerably across the sector. It may be unfair on (or impossible for) smaller units to be assessed on some of these elements. Many UoAs are artificial constructs for the purposes of REF and do not map onto the day-to-day reality of a department. In addition, the impact of redundancies and cuts to courses and departments as a result of recent financial instability in the sector – the majority of which have fallen within REF Panels C and D – would also affect data. This would further complicate the process of assessing or evidencing many of the proposed PCE elements at UoA level. There are also practical limitations on reporting data for smaller or even medium sized UoAs that would mean this was unworkable for several elements, such as staff characteristics in relation to equality, diversity and inclusion measures. For example, the REF2021 Panel D report shows that UoA 30, 31 and 33 all had an average unit size of less than 20 FTE and, as the report observed, in Panel D: “... [a]ll but one UOA (29 (Classics)) had submissions with fewer than 10 FTE.”

Secondly, including many of the elements at UoA level would create significant extra burden for institutions, which runs counter to one of the stated objectives of the consultation and REF team. Assessing at unit level for even just a few of these elements could prove unwieldy for institutions and assessors. However, there are some exceptions to our general preference for institutional level, as indicated in our response to question 15 below. These are informed by the experience of those

² Franssen, B. with Freeman, J., and Aiyenitaju, O., Babajide, B., Denedo, M., Kator Iorfa, S., Oyedijo, A. (2024), *Unlocking the Pipeline: Supporting the Retention, Progression and Promotion of Black Early-Career-Academics*, HEPI Report 176.

involved in previous exercises, mainly REF2021, and the desire to protect the visibility of our disciplines in this part of the exercise.

The pilots for PCE will be crucial in establishing which elements should be taken forward. At this point in the consultation, it does not appear that there is robust evidence to show that appropriate indicators can be mapped onto many of the elements. With all of this and our reflections above in mind, the increased weighting that is being afforded to PCE seems premature. Without meaningful evidence that appropriate indicators for each research element can be measured and assessed, we would urge the REF PCE elements focus on evidence that has proven amenable to qualitative or quantitative analysis in previous exercises. As ever, the British Academy would be happy to help convene or bring together expertise to discuss this further.

Submitted response

[from question 13 onwards]

13. How important do you consider each of the following elements of People, Culture and Environment to the task of supporting high-quality research, engagement and impact?

[Please note the list of research culture elements is in randomised order and appears in the same randomised order in later questions. No priority levels are implied for elements near the start of the list]

Select: Not at all important; mainly important; moderately important; very important; don't know/no opinion

- Diversity of research ideas and practices
 - *Don't know/no opinion*
- Equality, diversity and inclusion in research and/or research careers
 - *Very important*
- Responsible research assessment (i.e. assessing the merit of the work and not the publication channel, its impact factor or other journal-level metrics, or the publisher).
 - *Very important*
- Fair employment practices
 - *Very important*
- Psychological safety
 - *Very important*
- Professional and career development
 - *Moderately important*
- Support for career diversity
 - *Moderately important*
- Research strategy and capacity (including workloads)
 - *Very important*
- Collegiality (e.g. being supportive to colleagues, willingness to engage in departmental/faculty matters, university citizenship, or service work)
 - *Very important*
- Creativity and innovation

- *Very important*
- Interdisciplinarity and team research
 - *Moderately important*
- Mental health and wellbeing
 - *Very important*
- Recognition for all those involved in research
 - *Moderately important*
- Broadening what is recognised as contributing to research
 - *Moderately important*
- Openness and open research
 - *Moderately important*
- Collaboration and engagement
 - *Very important*
- Academic freedom
 - *Very important*
- Positive research leadership
 - *Moderately important*
- Research integrity and reproducibility
 - *Don't know/no opinion*
- Environmental sustainability
 - *Don't know/no opinion*

14. To what extent do you think each of the following should be objectives of assessing PCE in the REF?

Select: Should not be an objective; should be a minor objective; should be a major objective; don't know/no opinion

- For analysis, i.e. to better understand aspects of UK Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs') engagement with people, culture and environment
 - *Should be a minor objective*
- For system-intelligence, i.e. to better understand links between PCE and research quality, productivity and impact
 - *Should be a minor objective*
- For advocacy, i.e. to enable HEIs to showcase their best practice
 - *Should not be an objective*
- For accountability, i.e. to enable HEIs to monitor their progress against various aspects of PCE
 - *Should be a minor objective*
- For comparison, i.e. to benchmark each HEIs standards on PCE against the rest of the sector
 - *Should not be an objective*
- For adaptation of behaviours, i.e. to incentivise institutions to travel further and continue to make improvements on PCE
 - *Should not be an objective*
- For allocation, i.e. to reward progress (including through a journey travelled approach) by providing funding
 - *Should be a minor objective*

Any other major objectives you believe should be included? (max. 300 characters, including spaces)

15. For each of the following elements of People, Culture and Environment, please use the drop-down menus to give us your view on:

- Whether assessment should best be done at institutional or unit level, or both? ('unit' refers to unit of assessment, typically equivalent to a research field or department within an institution)
 - o *Options for 'Level of assessment' are: institutional level; unit level; both; don't know*

- Whether evidence should be mainly based on quantitative measures, document evidence (certificates/accreditations, etc), narrative statements, or something else?
 - o *Options for 'type of evidence' are: mainly quantitative measures; mainly document evidence; mainly narrative statement; mainly document evidence and quantitative measures; mainly quantitative measures and narrative statement; mainly narrative statement and document evidence; a balanced mixture of all three; something else; don't know.*

- Diversity of research ideas and practices
 - o *Level: Don't know*
 - o *Evidence: Don't know*
- Equality, diversity and inclusion in research and/or research careers
 - o *Level: Institutional*
 - o *Evidence: mainly quantitative measures and narrative statement*
- Responsible research assessment (i.e. assessing the merit of the work and not the publication channel, its impact factor or other journal-level metrics, or the publisher)
 - o *Level: Institutional*
 - o *Evidence: mainly narrative statement and document evidence*
- Fair employment practices
 - o *Level: Don't know*
 - o *Evidence: Don't know*
- Psychological safety
 - o *Level: Don't know*
 - o *Evidence: Don't know*
- Professional and career development
 - o *Level: Both*
 - o *Evidence: A balanced mixture of all three*
- Support for career diversity
 - o *Level: Both*
 - o *Evidence: Don't know*
- Research strategy and capacity (including workloads)
 - o *Level: Institutional*
 - o *Evidence: A balanced mixture of all three*
- Collegiality (e.g. being supportive to colleagues, willingness to engage in departmental/faculty matters, university citizenship, or service work)
 - o *Level: Don't know*
 - o *Evidence: Don't know*

- Creativity and innovation
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Interdisciplinarity and team research
 - *Level: Both*
 - *Evidence: mainly document evidence and quantitative measure*
- Mental health and wellbeing
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Recognition for all those involved in research
 - *Level: Institutional*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Broadening what is recognised as contributing to research
 - *Level: Institutional*
 - *Evidence: Mainly narrative statement and document evidence*
- Openness and open research
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Collaboration and engagement
 - *Level: Both*
 - *Evidence: Mainly document evidence*
- Academic freedom
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Positive research leadership
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Research integrity and reproducibility
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*
- Environmental sustainability
 - *Level: Don't know*
 - *Evidence: Don't know*

If you selected the 'something else' option in the 'types of evidence' menu for any of the above items, feel free to let us know if you have any specific alternate evidence types in mind (max. 700 characters, including spaces).

Fair hiring practices must encompass all eligible staff, including those on 0.2FTE, to mitigate against game-playing, if the Fair Employment practices is taken forward as part of PCE.

16. Which of the following sector initiatives, concordats and accreditations do you think ought to play a role in assessment of PCE?

[Please tick all that apply. If you have not heard of any of the initiatives, concordats and accreditations, simply leave them unticked]

Selected options:

- Athena Swan Charter (2005, revised in 2015 and 2021)

- Concordat to Support Research Integrity (2012, revised in 2019)
- Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers (2008, revised in 2019)
- Guidance for Safeguarding in International Development Research (2020)
- HR Excellence in Research Concordat (2008, revised in 2019)
- Race Equality Charter (2016)
- San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) (2013)

Any other sector initiatives, concordats and accreditations that should play a role in the assessment of PCE? (please specify, max. 200 characters, including spaces)

It is not clear how these would be used so it is difficult to say whether useful or not. Institutional sign-up is trackable but it is difficult to assess beyond that.

17. For each of the following elements of People, Culture and Environment, please use the drop-down menus to give us your views on:

- Overall, how feasible you think it is to robustly evidence each element? (feel free to consider the kinds of evidence sources you think would be needed for each)
 - Options for 'overall feasibility evidencing' are: very easy; quite easy; quite difficult; very difficult; don't know
- What you think might be the likelihood of negative unintended consequences of collecting and assessing evidence?
 - Options for 'likelihood of negative unintended consequences' are: very low; quite low; quite high; very high; don't know
- Diversity of research ideas and practices
 - *Evidencing: Very difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Equality, diversity and inclusion in research and/or research careers
 - *Evidencing: Quite easy*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite High*
- Responsible research assessment (i.e. assessing the merit of the work and not the publication channel, its impact factor or other journal-level metrics, or the publisher)
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite low*
- Fair employment practices
 - *Evidencing: Don't know*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Psychological safety
 - *Evidencing: Very difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Professional and career development
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Don't know*
- Support for career diversity
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Research strategy and capacity (including workloads)

- *Evidencing: Quite easy*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Don't know*
- Collegiality (e.g. being supportive to colleagues, willingness to engage in departmental/faculty matters, university citizenship, or service work)
 - *Evidencing: Very difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Creativity and innovation
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very High*
- Interdisciplinarity and team research
 - *Evidencing: Quite Easy*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite High*
- Mental health and wellbeing
 - *Evidencing: Very difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Recognition for all those involved in research
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Don't know*
- Broadening what is recognised as contributing to research
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very High*
- Openness and open research
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite high*
- Collaboration and engagement
 - *Evidencing: Quite easy*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite low*
- Academic freedom
 - *Evidencing: Quite difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Positive research leadership
 - *Evidencing: Quite easy*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Quite high*
- Research integrity and reproducibility
 - *Evidencing: Very difficult*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Very high*
- Environmental sustainability.
 - *Evidencing: Don't know*
 - *Likelihood of negative consequences: Don't know*

18. Please feel free to provide below any specific reflections you would like to make on any of the issues covered in any of the items in this survey (max 2,000 characters, including spaces)

[Please note: there is a further open-text box on the next page for any broader reflections you may wish to share about the inclusion of PCE in the REF]

Most of the different elements listed in Qs 13, 15 and 17 are important for good research culture. However, not all of these elements can be readily assessed by REF. The distinction between elements and indicators is important. We doubt many elements can be mapped by available and appropriate indicators.

- Indicators of research impact in REF2021 were for guidance and this should also be the case for PCE indicators.
- As in Q15, we think many of these elements should not be assessed at unit level. The significant variation in institution (& unit) size across the sector makes assessment impractical even at institution-level for some elements.

Our responses focus on elements that are assessable by REF.

- ‘Collegiality’ for example is what makes HEIs ‘run’ and is essential for good research culture. But it is exceptionally hard to capture for REF, which is not well-configured to measure a structure of feeling.
- Assessing elements such as ‘psychological harm’ and ‘mental health & well-being’ in ways that do not encourage under-reporting is highly problematic. Studies already suggest, for example, that fewer than 4 in 10 Black early career academics would be comfortable reporting bullying and harassment.
- Elements such as ‘Diversity of research ...’ and ‘Interdisciplinarity ...’ are vital at sector-level, but not invariably or HEI or UoA level (especially in small UoAs). This formulation risks arbitrarily privileging diverse teams and interdisciplinarity, rather than measuring and rewarding excellence.
- ‘Fair hiring’ is integral to excellent research. However, while practices often differ within HEIs, for some smaller UoAs meaningful evidence of hiring may not be possible to demonstrate.
- EDI is also vital to excellent research. However, quantitative measurement for many elements of EDI may not be possible at UoA level.

19. Please feel free to provide below any additional thoughts you might have on the inclusion, evidencing and assessment of ‘people, culture and environment’ in the Research Excellence Framework. (max 2,000 characters, including spaces)

- Is PCE intended to measure and reward excellence? Or, is it intended to shape future behaviours? If the latter, what is REF’s evidence base for this aspiration?
- We welcome the PCE pilots but consider the increased weighting of PCE (compared to ‘Environment’) premature. Without robust evidence that appropriate indicators for each research element can be measured and assessed, REF should focus on evidence already proven amenable to qualitative or quantitative analysis in previous exercises.
- The use of indicators will pose significant bureaucratic burdens, particularly if undertaken at UoA level. Given the REF schedule and the current pace of change and institutional redundancies, many will need to be collected retrospectively, increasing the burden and reducing accuracy.
- Fair hiring practices must encompass all eligible staff, including those on 0.2FTE, to mitigate against game-playing via short-term, fractional researchers appointed for REF submissions.

- We note that in SHAPE disciplines, particularly the humanities, responsible research assessment must include equal treatment for outputs, regardless of the language of publication.
- The Academy strongly supports interdisciplinary research and advocates the creation of PCE assessment mechanisms that neither disadvantage nor advantage interdisciplinary research.

20. Please feel free to provide below any feedback you may have about the design, functionality or any other technical aspects of this survey (max. 2,000 characters, including spaces)

The demographic questions at the outset of the survey seem to assume that responders will be individuals, but we believe many respondents will be making institutional submissions, for which these questions are not applicable. This needs to be factored into the analysis of results.

- This survey addresses many core, complex issues for UK university researchers. It is unfortunate that there is so little opportunity to provide meaningful qualitative comments for Qs 18, 19 and 20. Our replies are accordingly very condensed.
- On Q17 'likelihood' for negative unintended consequences is not the same as 'potential for', but the latter is equally problematic.
- Several terms and concepts in the survey are ill-defined. They will also often operate differently in different disciplines and research contexts. For example, what is meant by 'support for career diversity'? Likewise, reproducibility operates very differently in many Arts and Humanities and some Social Sciences disciplines than in STEM. Does 'environmental sustainability' refer to ecological sustainability/net zero or to the sustainability of the UoA's/HEI's research culture? It is not clear from the survey how these are being defined, which makes it harder to answer on these elements.