What's changed for REF 2029?

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) assesses research at UK universities and helps inform how public research funding is allocated. REF 2029 assesses research by subject areas (known as a Units of Assessment), not by individual staff members. The biggest change since REF 2021 is that universities will no longer use a single census date to decide which staff to submit to the REF. Instead, contract data submitted to HESA for academic years 2025/26 and 2026/27 is used to calculate a two-year average for each unit. This 'volume measure' determines how many outputs and impact case studies each unit submits.

This guide reflects the final REF guidance published on 11 November 2026: Guidance on Submissions – REF 2029.

Staff and the REF 2029 'volume measure'

As above, individual staff are now no longer classed as 'in' or 'out' of REF, as in previous exercises. Instead, contract data is taken from HESA. How an individual's contract is recorded in these REF HESA fields makes no difference to the career development or access to opportunities for the colleague holding that contract. For more on how Manchester identifies and allocates eligible contracts, see the Code of Practice summary. Research England approved Manchester's Code of Practice in August 2026.

Outputs (55% of a unit's score, down from 60%)

The outputs element of the submission remains the largest in terms of overall % of a UoAs score. Now called 'Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (CKU)', this element remains largely familiar to REF 2021 in terms of the assessment criteria of originality, significance, and rigour. Each unit submits a pool of research outputs, calculated by their volume measure x 2.5. These outputs are now largely 'decoupled' from the authors who produced them. **There is no minimum number of outputs that must be submitted per person,** as in previous exercises**.** Units select eligible work that fits their subject area, regardless of which staff contracts count towards their 'volume measure'. Manchester must be able to show a qualifying link between the work and the University. If the same output fits more than one subject area, each submission needs a separate qualifying link. For example, if an output fits in both geography and politics, we could submit it to both UoAs, provided we could demonstrate two eligible links to the output (i.e. two eligible authors at the time of publication). REF expect that no more than five outputs will be linked to the same contract in a UoAs submission. However, this is

an ‘expected maximum’ rather than a hard cap. The unit must explain the rationale where they exceed this.

A wide range of research output types may be submitted to REF, including (but not limited to) articles, books, datasets, software and performances. Manchester will continue to prioritise quality, using peer review primarily through the Research Review Exercise (RRE). Updated REF open access requirements apply to in-scope journal articles and conference contributions published from January 2026. More information on this can be found from our Office for Open Research.

Impact (25%, unchanged)

The renamed ‘Engagement and Impact’ element will still be assessed through impact case studies that show the reach and significance of changes or benefits brought about by our research, beyond academia. The research behind a case study no longer needs to meet a 2* quality threshold as in REF 2021, but it must still meet the REF definition of research (‘a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’). Case studies can recognise contributions from research-enabling colleagues and postgraduate researchers. Engagement and responsible research practices can strengthen a case study where they helped extend the reach or significance of the impact, but they are not assessed separately. The smallest units (<10 FTE) can now choose to submit one case study instead of two, but this will not apply to any UoAs at Manchester.

Strategy, People and Research Environment (20%, up from 15%)

Strategy, People and Research Environment (SPRE) replaces the REF 2021 environment element. It gives more attention to research culture and how the University and units create the conditions that support excellent research, including support for the wider research community. This more explicitly includes colleagues who enable or support research, as well as postgraduate researchers and research staff. This is also where we describe how we support collaboration, engagement and impact. The University-wide and subject-level statements are assessed separately and make up 60% and 40% of the environment score respectively. Panels also consider data submitted on research income and doctoral degrees awarded. Research-in-kind is now no longer a mandatory part of the submission but may be referred to if the unit wishes. Our SPRE data road map details when certain data will be made available to UoA teams as part of our REF 2029 preparations. This roadmap will be updated periodically and aims to allow a coordinated approach to REF preparation.

Key dates and further guidance

The submission deadline is **24 November 2028**. Results are due in **December 2029**.

For Manchester updates, see REF 2029 on StaffNet. For the full rules, see the REF 2029 Guidance on Submissions and Panel Criteria and Working Methods. Start with your Faculty REF Manager for local REF questions, or your Faculty research impact team for help developing a case study.