



# Understanding the REF

A quick primer for PGRs  
(and anyone else interested)

Dr Lawrence McNamara & Dr Sarah Fox

[York Law School](#), University of York

28 July 2020

[Event page and links for this webinar](#)

# Presenters

## **Dr Lawrence McNamara - primary discipline Law**

Lawrence is a Reader at York Law School. He is also the Deputy Director of Research and the Impact Lead for the School. Lawrence has held academic posts in Australia and the UK. From 2013-17 he was Deputy Director of an NGO (the Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law). His PhD is from the University of Sydney, which he did part-time while working as academic. He researches in areas relating to transparency and accountability, especially in relation to national security and media freedom. His publications include ['Understanding Research Impact in Law: The REF and Engagement with UK Governments'](#) (2018) 29(3) *Kings Law Journal* 437-469.

## **Dr Sarah Fox - primary discipline History**

Sarah is the REF Impact Officer at York Law School. Awarded an AHRC studentship, in 2017 she completed her PhD in History at the University of Manchester. She has BA and MA degrees from the University of Leeds, and has taught at Manchester and Liverpool. Sarah researches in areas relating to birth and midwifery. She has published and presented her research widely, and worked on public engagement projects for the National Trust and museums. Before moving to an academic career Sarah worked in health and social care.

Both Sarah and Lawrence have had their PhD research published in peer-reviewed journals and as monographs (with Sarah's book forthcoming next year!)

# Understanding the REF: Overview

1. What might be helpful for me to know? Why?
2. What is the REF?
3. REF 2021
  - Outputs
  - Impact
  - Environment
4. How might understanding the REF help me as a PGR or as an ECR?
5. Q&A

# What might be helpful for me to know? Why?

Depends on your role / job

What do I need to do? vs. What do I need to know?

What do I need to know? vs. What would it help me to know? vs. What do I want to know?

For a PGR student:

- What: Know what the REF is. Know the criteria that are used. Know the REF components.
- Why: Think about how it might be relevant for your skills and knowledge development – eg locating your research within the scholarship in your field, career development in and out of academia

# What is the REF: a little bit of history

## The RAE (Research Assessment Exercise) [www.rae.ac.uk](http://www.rae.ac.uk)

- 1986, 1989 (as the Research Selectivity Exercise)
- 1992, 1996, 2001, 2008
- Various changes along the way

## The REF (Research Excellence Framework)

- [REF 2014](#): introduced impact
- [REF 2021](#) (covers 2014-2020): retained & increased impact, changed approach to outputs
- REF 2028? It will be some time before we know.

# What is the REF: a few starting points

**REF = Research Excellence Framework** [www.ref.ac.uk](http://www.ref.ac.uk)

**Purpose / function: calculates distribution of funding to HEIs (“QR funding”)**

**An effect: league tables**

**Who runs it?**

- **Research England (RE), for the four UK funding bodies (RE, HEFCW, SFC, DfE)**
- **Possible confusion (1):** The research councils (ESRC, AHRC, etc) are different. They provide separate funding. They are a part of UK Research and Innovation ([UKRI](http://www.ukri.org)).
- **Possible confusion (2):** Research England is part of UKRI. HEFCW, SFC & DfE are not part of UKRI.

# What is the REF: scoring and funding

## Scoring

- 4\*, 3\*, 2\*, 1\* (We'll come back to this in more detail)

## Funding

- Only 4\* and 3\* will be counted towards funding
- 4\* to 3\* is funded at a ratio of 4:1      In simple terms:
  - A 4\* publication (or impact case study) will give a university 4 times more income than a 3\* publication (or case study)
  - A 2\* or 1\* publication (or case study) attracts no funding at all.
  - The effect is that universities are driven towards wanting staff to produce outputs and impact of at least 3\* standard and, better still, 4\* standard.

# What is the REF: stepping back now, how does it work?

## REF submissions (or REF “returns”)

- Submissions are based around disciplines, divided into 34 Units of Assessment (UoAs).
- UoA 18 is Law. UoA 19 is Politics and International Studies.
- A university may choose to submit to only some UoAs

## What is in a REF submission? In REF 2021 it will be:

- **Research Outputs:** a bunch of publications
- **Research Impact:** a number of case studies, each about 5 pages long
- **Research Environment:** an 8,000 word statement about how the department conducts and supports its research and impact. This includes data relating to PhD enrolments and completions, and to research funding.

# What is the REF: what does a REF result look like?

The next couple of slides show REF 2014 results. The University of York has been chosen as an example from the [full list of institutions](#).

- **First: Overall results for UoAs.**

- The landing page, which shows an overall result for each of the 24 UoA submissions from York. It shows the % of submission that, overall, was 4\* / 3\* / 2\* / 1\* / UC (unclassified). At the far right it shows the number of staff submitted for that UoA. In 2014 not everyone in a department was required to be submitted.

- **Second: Expanded profiles for UoAs.**

- This breaks each down into profile for outputs, impact and environment.

- **Third: A UoA profile and submission data.**

- This shows the expanded profile and has links to the full submission.

[Home](#) » [Results & submissions](#) » [Select institution](#) » University of York

Results & submissions

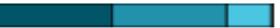
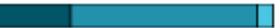
## University of York

Introduction

Overall profiles **Outputs** Impact Environment

Search submission data

Analysis

Select UOA link to view submission	Expand all profiles	% of the submission meeting the standard for:					FTE Category A staff submitted	
		4*	3*	2*	1*	U/C		
<a href="#">2 - Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care</a>	+	Overall	42	41	16	1	0	 52.74
<a href="#">4 - Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience</a>	+	Overall	51	44	5	0	0	 24.90
<a href="#">5 - Biological Sciences</a>	+	Overall	47	43	10	0	0	 44.37
<a href="#">7 - Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences</a>	+	Overall	14	56	26	4	0	 24.10
<a href="#">8 - Chemistry</a>	+	Overall	27	67	6	0	0	 47.06
<a href="#">9 - Physics</a>	+	Overall	21	56	18	5	0	 34.33

[Home](#) » [Results & submissions](#) » [Select institution](#) » University of York

Results & submissions

## University of York

Introduction

Overall profiles **Outputs** Impact Environment

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Analysis

Select UOA link to view submission

Hide all profiles

% of the submission meeting the standard for:

4\* 3\* 2\* 1\* U/C

4\* 3\* 2\* 1\* U/C

FTE Category  
A staff submitted

### 2 - Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U/C	FTE
<b>Overall</b>	42	41	16	1	0	52.74
<b>Outputs</b>	17.1	56.6	24.8	1.5	0.0	
<b>Impact</b>	80.0	20.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>Environment</b>	100.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	

### 4 - Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U/C	FTE
<b>Overall</b>	51	44	5	0	0	24.90
<b>Outputs</b>	43.4	49.4	7.2	0.0	0.0	
<b>Impact</b>	46.7	53.3	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>Environment</b>	87.5	12.5	0.0	0.0	0.0	

### 5 - Biological Sciences

	4*	3*	2*	1*	U/C	FTE
<b>Overall</b>	47	43	10	0	0	44.37
<b>Outputs</b>	32.2	51.7	15.5	0.0	0.6	
<b>Impact</b>	92.0	8.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	
<b>Environment</b>	50.0	50.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	

[Home](#) » [Results & submissions](#) » [Select institution](#) » [University of York](#) » View submission: 20 - Law

Results & submissions

## View submission

View submission:  
20 - Law

20 - Law

University of York

Research groups

Staff members

Outputs

Impact

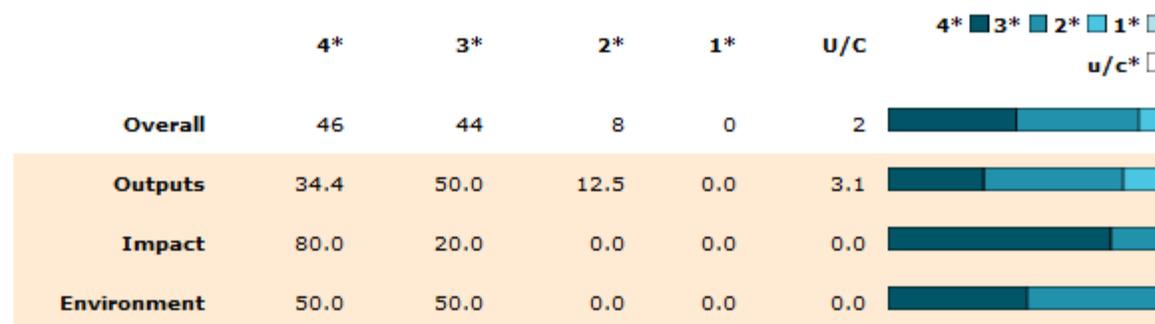
Environment

Introduction

Search submission data

Analysis

% of the submission meeting the standard for:



Category A staff FTE: 10.00

Category C staff headcount: 0

Category A and C staff headcount: 10

### View submission data

- [Research groups \(RG\)](#)
- [Staff members \(REF1a/c\)](#)
- [Research outputs \(REF2\)](#)
- [Impact template & case studies \(REF3a/b\)](#)
- [Environment template & data \(REF4a/b/c, REF5\)](#)

**REF 2021**

**First: Outputs**

# REF 2021: Outputs (worth 60% of total UoA result)

## The submission (roughly)

- A UoA must submit an average of 2.5 peer-reviewed publications (published across 2014-2020) for every FTE staff member on research & teaching posts (eg, a lecturer) and also for some research-only posts (eg, some post doc fellows).
- A minimum of one output must be returned for each of the above staff
- A maximum of five outputs for each of the above staff
- Publications by PhD students are neither required nor eligible for submission (though if co-authored then the position may be different)
- What is an output? A peer-reviewed article is standard but there are many possibilities.

**The criteria:** 4\*, 3\*, 2\*, 1\*

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria

Table A2: Outputs sub-profile: Criteria and definitions of starred levels

The criteria for assessing the quality of outputs are 'originality, significance and rigour'	
Four star	Quality that is world-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Three star	Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence.
Two star	Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
One star	Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.
Unclassified	Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work. Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria

The criteria are expanded upon in the REF documentation.

[Panel Criteria and Working Methods \(REF 2019/02\)](#), January 2019

**Are all disciplines treated the same way?**

Main panels:

- **Panel A: 6 UoAs (roughly, Health)**
- **Panel B: 6 UoAs (roughly, STEM);**
- **Panel C: 12 UoAs (roughly, Social Sciences)**
- **Panel D: 10 UoAs (roughly, Arts & Humanities)**

Sub-panels: one for each UoA

**Who reads and assesses the work?** You can see the [panel membership](#)

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria – example Main Panel C

**Four star**: some of the following characteristics

- outstandingly novel in developing concepts, paradigms, techniques or outcomes
- a primary or essential point of reference
- a formative influence on the intellectual agenda
- application of exceptionally rigorous research design and techniques of investigation and analysis
- generation of an exceptionally significant data set or research resource

**Three star**: some of the following characteristics

- novel in developing concepts, paradigms, techniques or outcomes
- an important point of reference
- contributing very important knowledge, ideas and techniques which are likely to have a lasting influence on the intellectual agenda
- application of robust and appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis
- generation of a substantial data set or research resource.

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria – example Main Panel C

**Two star**: some of the following characteristics

- providing important knowledge and the application of such knowledge
- contributing to incremental and cumulative advances in knowledge
- thorough and professional application of appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis

**One star**: some of the following characteristics

- providing useful knowledge, but unlikely to have more than a minor influence
- an identifiable contribution to understanding, but largely framed by existing paradigms or traditions of enquiry
- competent application of appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis.

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria cf. PhD requirements

Typical expression: An original contribution to knowledge

[UK Quality Assurance Agency Frameworks for Higher Education](#) (Oct 2014, para 4.18)

Doctoral degrees are awarded to students who have demonstrated:

- the creation and interpretation of new knowledge, through original research or other advanced scholarship, of a quality to satisfy peer review, extend the forefront of the discipline, and merit publication
- a systematic acquisition and understanding of a substantial body of knowledge which is at the forefront of an academic discipline or area of professional practice
- the general ability to conceptualise, design and implement a project for the generation of new knowledge, applications or understanding at the forefront of the discipline, and to adjust the project design in the light of unforeseen problems
- a detailed understanding of applicable techniques for research and advanced academic enquiry

# REF 2021: Outputs criteria

How do I find the criteria for my discipline?

**Step 1**: In the [list of UoAs](#) find your UoA and note which of the four “main panels” it is part of:

**Step 2**: Look at the [Panel Criteria and Working Methods \(REF 2019/02\)](#). Go to “Section 3: Outputs”, which begins at page 34.

- First, at paras [190]-[195] are definitions of originality, significance and rigour for all panels.
- Second, find the criteria explanation for your main panel:

**Panel A [para 197ff]; Panel B [para 202]; Panel C [para 203]; Panel D [para 204].**

**REF 2021**

**Next: Impact**

# REF 2021: Impact (worth 25% of total UoA result)

## What is impact?

Impact includes, but is not limited to, an effect on, change or benefit to:

- the activity, attitude, awareness, behaviour, capacity, opportunity, performance, policy, practice, process or understanding
- of an audience, beneficiary, community, constituency, organisation or individuals
- in any geographic location whether locally, regionally, nationally or internationally

[Guidance on submissions](#), para 298

## How is impact assessed in the REF?

- Impact Case Studies are submitted

# REF 2021: Impact (worth 25% of total UoA result)

## The submission (roughly)

- A UoA must submit at least two impact case studies (ICS) for the first 20 staff, with a further ICS for about every 15 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff members on research & teaching posts (eg, a lecturer) and also for some research-only posts.

- Up to FTE      Number of ICS for REF 2021

Up to 19.99      2

20 to 34.99      3

35 to 49.99      4

50 to 64.99      5

And so on ...

## What does an impact case study cover?

- Easiest to look at examples from 2014: [REF 2014 database of case studies](#)
- REF 2021 is a bit different but 2014 is a sufficient guide for grasping what it's all about

# REF 2021: Impact (worth 25% of total UoA result)

The criteria: 4\*, 3\*, 2\*, 1\*

**Remember the funding model – and keep in mind how many FTE a dept has:**

- If there are 2 case studies, each one is worth 12.5% of the total score for the UoA submission.
- If there are 3 case studies, each one is worth 8.3% ....
- If there are 4 case studies, each one is worth 6.25% ....

**How much funding does an impact case study bring in?**

Very complex formulas, much variation. One study (Reed & Kerridge) put the REF 2014 average at about:

- 4\*: £324,000 (which is £46,000 a year for seven years)
- 3\*: £75,000 (which is £10,700 a year for seven years)

# REF 2021: Impact criteria

Table A3: Impact sub-profile: Criteria and definitions of starred levels

The criteria for assessing impacts are 'reach' and 'significance':	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>In assessing the impact described within a case study, the panel will form an overall view about its 'reach and significance' taken as a whole, rather than assess 'reach and significance' separately.</li></ul>	
Four star	Outstanding impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Three star	Very considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Two star	Considerable impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
One star	Recognised but modest impacts in terms of their reach and significance.
Unclassified	The impact is of little or no reach and significance; or the impact was not eligible; or the impact was not underpinned by excellent research produced by the submitted unit.

# REF 2021: Impact (worth 25% of total UoA result)

## Challenges

- What is impact? (And what is not impact?)
- The model: do research, and then that research has impact (though this is more flexible now)
- Impact must have occurred between 1 August 2013 – 31 Dec 2020, while person worked here
- Getting evidence of impact
- The role of luck, and making your own luck

**Useful guide to impact in REF 2021:** Univ of Sheffield: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/impact/ref>

**REF 2021**

**Finally: Environment**

# REF 2021: Environment (worth 15% of total UoA result)

## The submission (roughly)

- A UoA must submit a statement of about 8,000 – 10,000 words that explains the environment for research and enabling impact, consisting of the following sections:
  - Unit context, research and impact strategy.
  - People, including:
    - staffing strategy and staff development
    - research students
    - equality and diversity.
  - Income, infrastructure and facilities.
  - Collaboration and contribution to the research base, economy and society.

**The criteria:** 4\*, 3\*, 2\*, 1\*

**Again, remember the funding model**

# REF 2021: Environment criteria

Table A4: Environment sub-profile: Criteria and definitions of starred levels

The research environment will be assessed in terms of its 'vitality and sustainability'. Panels will consider both the 'vitality and sustainability' of the submitted unit, including its approach to enabling impact from its research, and its contribution to the 'vitality and sustainability' of the wider research base.	
Four star	An environment that is conducive to producing research of world-leading quality and enabling outstanding impact, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
Three star	An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally excellent quality and enabling very considerable impact, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
Two star	An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally recognised quality and enabling considerable impact, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
One star	An environment that is conducive to producing research of nationally recognised quality and enabling recognised but modest impact, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
Unclassified	An environment that is not conducive to producing research of nationally recognised quality or enabling impact of reach and significance.

**REF 2021**

**How might understanding the REF help me  
as a PGR or as an ECR?**

# The REF from a PGR perspective

**Remember that the REF does not drive everything and everybody, and nor should it**

**You should not need to worry about REF 2021 (unless you have been told differently!)**

**Not every PGR wants to go into an academic career**

**For those that want an academic career:**

- We won't know for several years what REF 2028 will look like. Whatever the case, academics will be required to (a) produce strong publications and (b) develop and deploy impact skills to at least some extent.
- The “REF cycle” means that publications from 1 January 2021 will count to the next REF.

**For those not pursuing an academic career, there is still much value in understanding the REF.**

# Understanding the REF as a PGR (or ECR): your skills and knowledge development

## Understanding outputs

- Recognising and articulating and making significant, original contributions to knowledge and rigorous methodology.
- Recognising how those criteria are also often at the heart of what top-tier journals want.
- Understanding what is demanded of staff and how that fits into recruitment strategies and publication strategies for both individuals and departments.

# Understanding the REF as a PGR (or ECR): your skills and knowledge development

## Understanding impact

- Understanding what impact is, and especially how it is different from engagement
- Understanding what evidence is needed to prove that there has been impact
- Understanding how to gather evidence
- Understanding what might be realistic impact aims
- Understanding that impact requirements drive many NGOs and other organisations; lots of organisations want and need to have impact.
- Understanding how academics and non-academic organisations might effectively work together.

# **Understanding the REF as a PGR (ECR): your skills and knowledge development**

## **Understanding environment**

Understanding what research environment is in REF terms and how it might drive what departments and universities do, and how you as a PGR student might use that to leverage support.

# Understanding the REF

**Q&A:** Use the Q&A function on zoom to send us questions.

## **How we will follow up:**

Today or tomorrow: we will email you a feedback form. It will ask you:

- Your views about the webinar - what you found helpful, etc
- Whether you would be interested in another webinar from us, specifically on impact

In late November or early December: we will email you another feedback form. It will ask you:

- How, if at all, any of what we covered has been helpful in the months since the webinar

**Links, downloads, etc:**

[Event page for this webinar](#)

**Feel free to get in touch:**

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