

London Higher's response to the UK's research funding bodies' consultation on the assessment of people, culture and environment in REF 2028

London Higher is the representative body for over 50 universities and higher education colleges, representing the full diversity of the capital's vibrant sector – from small, specialist conservatoires and research institutes to large, multi-faculty universities. Our Research Excellence Network convenes Deputy-/Pro-Vice-Chancellors (Research and Innovation), Directors of Research Policy, and similar roles. It met on 28 November 2023 to discuss proposed changes to the people, culture and environment (PCE) assessment for REF2028. Our members are hugely supportive of the focus on research culture, which chimes with previous discussions and work undertaken by the Network.

In July 2022 we hosted an event on diversifying the pipeline to doctoral study, publishing a [briefing paper](#) that set out the issues surrounding the lack of diversity across the academic pipeline throughout all stages of postgraduate study. It provides data on the London context and sets out the barriers to progression to postgraduate study for global majority students, and examines some of the ways in which London institutions can seek to break down these barriers.

Another aspect of the London context is the size of the city and its [thriving research ecosystem](#): 24.8% of all institutions submitting to REF2021 were based in the capital. 40.15% of London's outputs were classed as 4*, significantly ahead of the national average of 35.9%. For impact, 55.86% of submissions were given 4* (national average of 49.4%). Significantly for this consultation, 59.16% of London submissions were rated 4* for environment – the highest of any region and far beyond the national average of 49.6%.

London Higher and its members are committed to a research pipeline and academy that reflects the diversity of the capital and the talents of all Londoners. With this commitment and exposition of the London context in mind, we lay out our members' views on proposed changes to the REF PCE assessment.

Are the proposed changes to the REF the most appropriate way of evaluating and driving changes to research culture?

Concerns over the timeline

Institutions are still recovering from the Covid-19 pandemic, which caused significant operational and strategic instability. As members recover and work to build back better, we are concerned at the

implications of rushing to the next REF without properly understanding what is required in terms of the metrics, data and information that needs to be collected to support PCE – for example, will ‘template’ and ‘questionnaire’ have to be evidenced differently?

Within Annex A of the Initial Decisions Circular Letter, it states that institution and discipline level PCE statements ‘will be determined in the criteria-setting phase in consultation with the expert panels and the wider sector’ in Winter 2024/25 – which is very late in the process for such consultation.

Annex A also states that ‘further work to identify suitable metrics/data/indicators for both unit and institutional-level statements is planned and will include a strong consultative component with the sector’ – again, well into the current REF period. In the light of the extended consultation period that is happening within the REF period, and the changes to be introduced, it would be preferable to have the submission date delayed by a year.

Proposals for a pilot

In view of the timeline and the fact that these are major changes to the REF exercise – at increased weighting – our members recommend a robust and transparent pilot as per the introduction and pilot of ‘Impact’ for REF2014, with proposed PCE changes entering into effect for a future REF, rather than the next edition.

As this is such an important strand of work, it is important to be able to pilot effectively and robustly, especially where there are indicators that have not yet been piloted. Institutions must be confident that PCE can be consistently assessed, and the sector should be involved at every stage of this pilot.

Clarity and transparency of content, units and indicators

We ask for clarification on whether evidence from REF2021 will be used as a starting point, such as doctoral awards and grants captured through HESA. We also ask what Unit of Assessment (UoA) structure for PCE will look like – there is still no clarity, despite researchers and departments already identifying with units. Will metrics be attached to organisational units or groups or people for each UoA, or allocated through HESA subject codes? Annex A notes that REF2028 will retain REF2021 UoA and include advisory panels on (i) EDI; and (ii) interdisciplinary research, and that a separate panel will be appointed to undertake assessment of institutional-level PCE statements – however, there is no timeframe for the appointment of this panel.

Specificity and granularity regarding the scoring associated with the marking of constituent elements of PCE statements would aid transparency and consistency. Clear measures within the quantitative evidence component would also help ensure more equitable assessment.

Long-term benefits to research culture

By acting collaboratively across disciplines, institutions can generate positive change to research culture. We recommend a focus on distance travelled and not on changes implemented, to ensure that changes to PCE assessment and subsequent institutional actions encourage a drive to shape a positive and flourishing research culture in the long term, rather than shorter-term benefits to REF scores. Building a positive research culture should include examining case studies of what does and does not work; good practice sharing should enable institutions to take action that facilitates positive environments in which excellent research can take place. Underpinning these principles, a positive and thriving research culture requires an assurance of freedom of academic expression that is within the law.

We reiterate London Higher members' support of Research England's focus on people, research culture and environment, and ask that proposed changes that are properly and robustly piloted, in order to ensure that (i) PCE can be consistently and effectively assessed; (ii) the focus is on building and maintaining a positive research culture in the long term; and (iii) sufficient time is given to institutions to recover post-pandemic and properly take stock of such substantial changes.