

The Research Excellence Framework must continue to evolve.

Executive summary

- Wellcome supports the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2028 changes to increase the focus on people, culture and environment.
- REF is hugely influential, so how the People, Culture and Environment section is assessed matters.
- Allocating 25% of the REF weighting to the People, Culture and Environment section is not revolutionary: it will bring REF in line with the changing Research and Innovation sector.
- REF must meet the challenge of equitable assessment across various institutions and research environments.
- Concerns about how the REF will be assessed must not limit ambitions for change.

Consultation response

Wellcome supports the Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2028 changes to increase the focus on people, culture and environment.

People, culture and environment are at the heart of our research and innovation sector. They are the foundation of our research impact, outputs, and economic productivity – the dimensions our sector and society have become comfortable assessing and valuing. However, attaching value to the environments where research success begins and the people on whom it depends is far less comfortable. It is too easy to assume our sector's people, culture, and environments are thriving when focusing only on narrow outputs. Often, they are not.

This is not a new problem. In 2020, Wellcome published an in-depth report called "What researchers think about the culture they work in", where we heard from more than 4,000 researchers. The findings painted a shocking picture of the state of UK research culture and called for an urgent change. When researchers were asked to describe their research culture in three words, self-designated negative sentiments were more common than the neutral and positive combined, with "stressed", "insecure", and "individualistic" featuring prominently. While 84% of researchers were proud to work in the research community, only 29% felt secure pursuing a research career. Many also felt their research culture was getting worse. This is only one of many reports highlighting the same problems. Current practices are not working, and rapid change is required to shift from these negative cultures to a more positive environment.

REF is hugely influential, so how the People, Culture and Environment section is assessed matters.

REF has a considerable impact on the Research and Innovation sector. Its shift to focusing on people, culture and environment will impact submitting institutions, but also far beyond this. The 2028 changes will have intended but also unintended consequences, so they must be approached carefully. Some in the sector have raised concerns about the new balance of the weightings and how robust indicators for People, Culture and Environment can be developed.

Finding approaches that fairly and accurately assess the People, Culture and Environment section will take work. Research England's plan to hold consultations and hire experts to advise on the most appropriate evaluation methods is an essential first step. There is an inherent risk in any chosen evaluation method, for example, narrowing the scope of what makes an excellent research culture to the limits of what is "REF-able", diverting resources accordingly, and limiting our vision as a sector. Therefore, the REF team must ensure that their committees can assess and evaluate a range of research culture contributions, which could vary significantly by context.

Wellcome, as a funder, has played a significant role in driving negative cultures and like the REF, we have committed to changing and altering our funding approach. We have shifted to providing grants of a longer duration, embedding research environment approaches throughout the assessment criteria. In our [discovery research schemes](#) research environment (including research culture) accounts for 25% of the assessment score. We have created a funding scheme to provide institutional funding for research culture, and we now have a dedicated Research Culture and Communities team. These changes speak to our belief that the assessment of research culture must be broad and attuned to nuance.

At Wellcome, all applicants are asked to explain in their application forms how they will contribute to a positive and inclusive research culture. Here, we expect applicants to reflect on their context, what they have done in the past, and what they can do in the future to contribute to thriving research cultures. Our review panels are asked to consider how applicants promote positive and inclusive research cultures. We know this is a big ask for our committee members, and we have created specific prompts to enable them to feel more confident in their culture evaluations. We are also continually exploring how to collaborate with those who work with us to improve our research culture assessments and are happy to share our learning in this area. We do all of this because we believe that if we don't tackle the problems surrounding people, culture, and environment, it will be detrimental to the research we fund.

During 2023, Wellcome experimented with its funding in research culture. A concern we had during the development of the Institutional Funding for Research Culture was what happens when you add competition to a community space. We invited 43 institutions to apply for funding for research culture activities, eventually awarding 24 through a partially competitive, partially randomised process. We learned that introducing a degree of competition into a collaborative space had unintended effects on relationships between institutions, impacting how much they could share. We are now working to build a more collaborative space by introducing a community of practice to which all scheme applicants are invited to share collective findings even more widely. REF is a far more significant competition with higher stakes for many institutions: the eventual approach must mitigate these risks at a sector level.

Allocating 25% of the REF weighting to the People, Culture and Environment section is not revolutionary: it will bring REF in line with the changing Research and Innovation sector.

The Research and Innovation sector is already moving towards focusing more on the people, culture, and environment. Since 2014, the REF has assessed the research environment. The section's new title and weighting reflect the gradual change in the sector's understanding, not a radical overhaul. The pathway to change is marked by pivotal shifts in our understanding of how to support the people behind the research better. The UK government's 2021 R&D People and Culture strategy is a tangible example. This is aided by more and more universities and institutes working on enhancing their environment

using research culture strategies and funders, including ourselves, evaluating the research environment as part of funding decisions. The REF weighting is an inevitable next step and one our sector has already begun but continues to demand more from.

We understand that some concerns about the weighting of the People, Culture and Environment section are associated with reduced outputs from 60% to 50%. Outputs are not the only measure of success. In line with other UK funders, we began using the narrative CV as a standard assessment tool to understand the contributions of researchers to the development of others and the wider research community. We do this because we believe the way research is done is just as important as what research is done and because thriving research cultures are a prerequisite to sustaining research excellence. Research culture and research excellence go together. This speaks to the direction of the Research and Innovation sector. The sector is future-orientated, and within that positioning is an understanding that it needs to value the people and how research is done for the sector to thrive. The approach has enabled the UK to become a leading figure in research culture, and the REF could be an opportunity to build upon this.

This REF must meet the challenge of equitable assessment across a wide range of institutions and research environments.

Focusing on people, culture, and environment can reward institutions already creating positive and inclusive research cultures. This will look different across institutional contexts and involve honest, realistic reckoning with the challenges as a foundation for change. The difficulties in research environments are many, profound and systemic: no institution is immune. Assessors should expect this and must incentivise – not punish – honesty about challenges, leading to contextual improvements that uplift the baseline of acceptable research culture for all. In turn, we urge institutions to show confidence and courage in opening their research environments to scrutiny, offering trust at the start of this process.

REF 2028 must consider that institutions have varied internal resources and external funding to develop their people, cultures and environments. Assessment must avoid discriminating against less funded settings by inadvertently choosing measures correlating to resourcing rather than providing genuine insight into environments and experiences. External funding includes Wellcome's Institutional Funding for Research Culture and Research England's Enhancing Research Culture funding: neither could cover every institution in the UK, and many institutions received neither. Although we expect this funding will have positive impacts at institutional levels that can be shared across the wider sector, resourcing for research culture is not a direct indicator of a positive and inclusive culture.

This REF must meet the challenge of equitable assessment across a wide range of institutions and research environments. We believe this can be done, but that it may take a multipronged approach, combining – for example:

- A contextual, **“distance travelled” approach** could consider an institution's starting point and trajectory on people, culture and environment in the context of their specific institutional challenges and resourcing. This was important in our assessment of Institutional Funding for

Research Culture applications and ensured we could award various institution types, addressing varied research culture challenges.

- An **agreed standards approach** could define key dimensions achievable by institutions regardless of resources and lay the foundation for a positive, inclusive environment across contexts. This could involve alignment to existing standards, such as concordats if appropriate, and be compatible with a questionnaire approach. This should cover many people, culture and environment dimensions evaluated for their insight, importance, and resistance to unintended consequences. Measurements could include collection and transparency of equity, diversity and inclusion data concerning different roles, contract types and turnover; accessibility and transparency of reporting processes and outcomes for bullying and harassment; and institutional commitment to surveying staff and students about culture and environment, governed by independent standards of process and transparency. A risk of this approach, especially if not accompanied by other measures, is reducing ambitions and visions of environment and culture to a baseline.
- A **graduated approach** could place greater responsibilities and assessment scope on institutions with more internal and external resourcing. This could include responsibility for collaborative action across the sector. However, any such approach must guard against unintended messaging that culture and environment are more important in some places than others and must not limit ambition or recognition of less-resourced institutions.

Concerns about how the REF will be assessed must not limit ambitions for change.

REF 2028 is a unique tool to accelerate the changes already happening in the sector. Of course, change brings uncertainty, and there are many legitimate concerns about how the people, culture and environment section will be assessed. The “how” of determining research culture is difficult, but the sector must accept this challenge. This includes us at Wellcome, the REF, universities and all other stakeholders.