

Dear Vice-Chancellor or Principal,

I am writing to draw your attention to changes to the calculation of the REF volume measure which will take effect ahead of REF 2029.

We would encourage you to share the contents of this circular letter with Research Offices and Human Resources within your institution- in recognition of the potential need for close working between staff with responsibilities that may not traditionally overlap.

### **Changes in the REF Volume Measure**

As published in the [Initial Decisions](#), for REF 2029, institutions will submit outputs, not staff, to the assessment exercise. There will not be a REF census. Instead, the volume measure for REF 2029 will be calculated using contract level data taken directly from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) staff record. This data will be based on the full time equivalent (FTE) of staff on Teaching and Research contracts with significant responsibility for research (SRR) and staff on Research-only contracts who are independent researchers at your institution.

Our ambition is that HESA data becomes a single trusted source of information about the university research population that will support further uses and analyses beyond REF. For Research England, these further uses may include use as the volume measure for funding beyond collection of data specifically for REF purposes. We also have ambitions to improve the overall quality of data concerning university research in England, and enhanced, up-to-date information about the research population is an important component of those ambitions.

This move is part of work to break the link between individuals and the content of submissions and remove potential perverse incentives linked to a REF census date.

While the funding bodies recognise that initial effort will be required by HEIs to collect data on an annual basis, this change is designed to future-proof the REF and build a system that will become better integrated and less burdensome over time.

The REF team continues to work closely with HESA to ensure any changes to the HESA data collection process and the evolving REF timetable are carefully considered and communicated. The REF team also continues to explore with HESA possible mechanisms that would enable HEIs to make relevant and necessary changes to the data collected in the initial years, without detriment.

The REF team is also working closely with the small number of institutions which, due to local employment structures, do not return data on all eligible staff with significant responsibility for research to HESA, to ensure that their staff volume can be calculated robustly.

### **Timetable**

HESA data for academic year 2024/25 will be used as a pilot year for REF 2029. The deadline for the submission of this data to HESA is November 2025. This will provide an opportunity for HEIs to test their approach to compiling HESA data that will be used to calculate REF volume measures. This data will not be used in volume calculations for REF 2029.

HESA data for academic years 2025/26 and 2026/27 will be used to calculate volume measures for REF 2029.

### **Summary of Changes**

The volume measure for REF 2029 will be calculated using data taken directly from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) staff record. This data will be based on the FTE of staff on Teaching and Research contracts with significant responsibility for research (SRR) and staff on Research-only contracts who are independent researchers at your institution. The FTE used to calculate the REF 2029 volume measure will be gathered at a contract level.

This is a change to our previously announced position that data would be used at the person level, rather than the contract level.

In June 2024, the REF team launched a call for participation in a policy development deep dive working group, bringing together HESA and a group of representatives of the community to develop the next level of detail required to implement the use of HESA data to calculate volume measures. Community participation was carefully selected to ensure broad coverage of the diversity of REF-submitting institutions. Further information about the types of institutions represented can be found on the REF website.

This surfaced a set of clear recommendations that the REF team is now working to develop into policy. This included **a change to the HESA staff record to gather data relevant to this policy at contract level**. This means that information about SRR, research independence and Unit of Assessment will be gathered at a contract level.

This was deemed to better meet the requirement for robust and accurate data that best reflects the capacity for research within the sector, without increasing burden for the community.

### **Next Steps**

The REF team, on behalf of the funding bodies, will publish a policy module in Autumn/Winter 2024, which will include the full policy details relating to the use of the HESA Staff Record for the volume measure, along with associated guidance relating to REF Codes of Practice.

### **Further Information**

Any questions should be addressed to [info@ref.ac.uk](mailto:info@ref.ac.uk).

Yours sincerely,

Dr Steven Hill, Director of Research, on behalf of:

Professor Dame Jessica Corner FMedSci, MAE, RN  
Executive Chair, Research England

### **Annex A - Technical Detail**

On 31 July 2024, HESA published a [notification of changes](#) to the Staff Record which will result in information being gathered at contract level, from the 2024/25 collection onwards.

From the 2024/25 collection the HESA staff record will capture information at contract level which will be used to calculate the volume measure. The following variables will be used:

- REFQUALCON – contract qualifies for contribution to the REF volume measure calculation.

To qualify for REFQUALCON contracts must meet one of two criteria:

- 1) Be a research contract which is recognized through the reporting provider's REF Code of Practice to meet the definition of independent research activity.
- 2) Be a teaching and research contract which is recognized through the reporting provider's REF Code of Practice to meet the definition of involving Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR).

REFQUALCON will identify contracts that qualify for contribution to the REF volume measure, where they meet wider policy framework guidance.

- REFUOA2029 - This field records the REF unit of assessment relating to the contract(s) of the staff member
- CONFTE - This field identifies the percentage of a full-time equivalent (FTE) year being undertaken by staff on the contract over the course of the reporting period
- SIGRES - This field identifies that a contract has significant responsibility for research.

