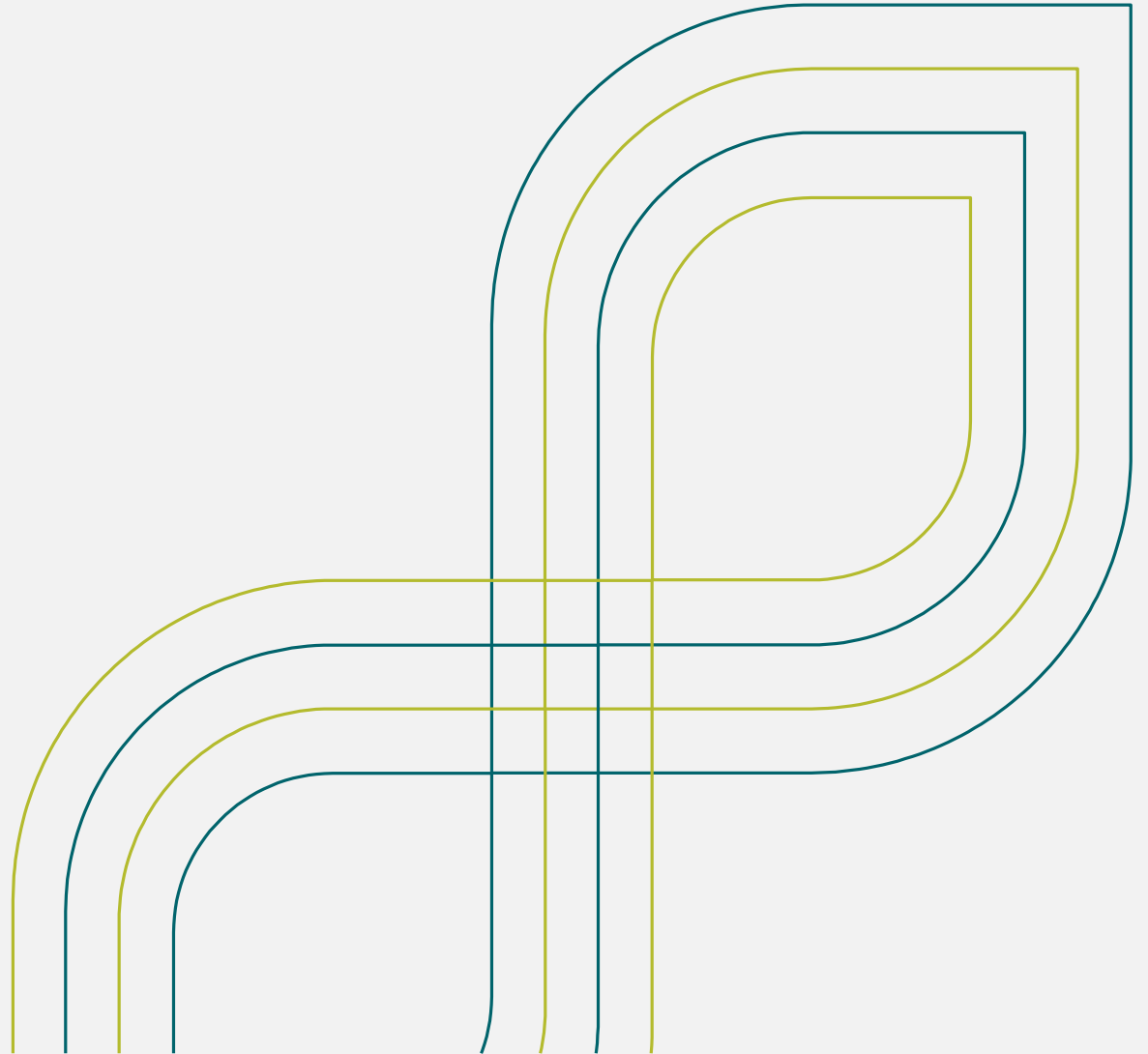




ARMA REF Forum



REF 2029

Research Excellence Framework

Research Diversity and Related Issues

ARMA REF Forum

Manchester

12th March 2026

Hugh McKenna CBE, PhD, BSc(Hons), FRCN, FAAN, FEANS, MAE, MEASA

Sub-Panel Chair 2008, 2014, 2021

RDAP Member and IDR WG Member REF2029

Panel Member of Hong Kong 2026 RAE



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Council for Wales

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Presentation Outline

- Introduction
- **Research Diversity in CKU**
 - Role and work of Research Diversity Advisory Panel
- **Research Diversity E&I**
 - Engagement Why and How
- **Research Diversity SPRE**
 - Decoupling
 - Statement of Representation
 - Indicative Maximum 5 Outputs
- Closing remarks,
- Q&A.



A Track Record of Calls for Research Diversity Recognition



Research Excellence Framework Review (Stern Report (2016)



Future of Research Assessment Programme (FRAP, 2023)



The Independent Review of Research Bureaucracy (2022)



Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA 2020)



Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA 2023)
<https://www.coara.org/>



RDI; Organisational Landscape (Nurse Review 2023)



The UK Science and Technology Framework (2025)

REF2029: Principles and Functions

1. REF should fulfil the following purposes:

- **Inform the allocation** of £2bn per annum block-grant research funding to HEIs based on research quality
- Provide **accountability for public investment** in research and produce evidence of the benefits of this investment
- Provide **insight into the health of research** in HEIs in the UK.

2. REF should underpin:

- A research system that produces **high-quality, rigorous** research that is **open** to all;
- **An inclusive and collaborative research system that supports a diversity of people, ideas, institutions, methodologies, outputs, and activities; and**
- An **engaged and impactful** research system that connects research with wider society to bring about positive socio-economic change.

3. REF decision making should be driven by:

- **Robustness** of assessment outcomes
- Impact of the system on **research culture**
- Ensuring that the **bureaucratic burden** of the system is proportionate.

From Initial Decisions published in June 2023.

Research Diversity: Definition

For the purposes of the REF, encouraging **research diversity** refers to enabling and recognising excellence in the widest possible range of **research practices, outputs, engagement approaches, and impacts.**

It also includes **recognition** of the **research strategies, cultures and environments** that enable **epistemically diverse and equitable creation**, validation, sharing and use of knowledge.



Initial
Decisions,
REF 2029

REF2029 Elements of Diversity

REF 2029 should underpin an **inclusive and collaborative** system that recognises and rewards a **diversity of *inter alia***:



RDAP

- Activities
- Ideas
- Methodologies
- Outputs
- Impacts

- Institutions
- Skills
- People

PDAP

Roles of the Research Diversity Advisory Panel

- **Advises the REF Steering Group** on issues of research diversity in the **development of working methods and delivery of the exercise**
- Advises on **panel recruitment** and contributes to panel **training** and ways of working.
- Advises on the development of REF **assessment criteria and the delivery of assessment** on matters relating to diversity of research.
- Contributes to the REF **assessment process**.
- Maintains an **ongoing assessment of diversity of research** considerations within REF 2029 and will produce a publishable **report** on this, at the end of the process.



Preparing Panels for Assessing Diversity

- The RDAP **advises/trains Main and Subpanel Members** on the importance of research diversity in all its manifestations.
- RADP has **representation on each of the four Main Panels** to provide expertise.
- All panels, main and sub, **undertake a calibration exercise** including the assessment of different types of outputs and impacts.
- Embedding the principle that sub-panels will **not regard any particular form of output as of greater or lesser quality than another**, and all subject matter will be **assessed on a fair and equal basis**, without bias.
- That assessment will recognise rigorous, significant and original research **across multiple purposes, formats, and modes of communication**.

What Ref Panels Get from RDAP Training

Understanding of research diversity in each UoA, including interdisciplinarity and awareness of the **range of research outputs, practices, and impacts and engagement** and practices that are characteristic of the field as a whole.

Appreciation of the **value and contribution of diverse research** to knowledge and understanding and to beneficial outcomes in the domain/s of each UoA and interdisciplinarily.

Commitment to support and **reward research diversity** and commit to an inclusive definition of excellence across the REF that includes appreciation of the **value of epistemic diversity** (e.g., philosophical, methodological, theoretical, practical).

Practices that transpose the **Understanding, Appreciation, and Commitment** into fair recognition of excellence across the full range of research.

Diversity of Established, New, and Evolving Research Approaches

- Algorithmic and Data-Driven Research
- Applied Knowledge and Policy Evidence
- Catalytic Research/Research Addressing Epistemic Inequality and Knowledge Marginalization
- Community Co-produced or Participatory Research
- Curation of Cultural Events, Collections and Exhibitions
- Creative Multimedia and Digital Works
- Design-Based Research
- Embodied and Experiential Research
- Meta-Research, Reflexive Research and Research Ethics.
- Methodological Innovation
- Open Research and Methodological Transparency
- Place-Based and Territorial Knowledge Development
- Practice Research
- Replication Research
- Research Synthesis
- Societal Challenge- Driven Research
- Theoretical, Basic or Discovery Research
- Transdisciplinary or Interdisciplinary Integration.

Research Diversity

**Contribution to Knowledge
and Understanding**

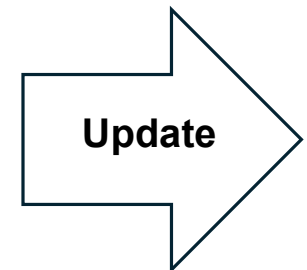


Diverse Output Data from Previous Exercises

- In **REF2021** out of **185,594** outputs submitted, diverse outputs made up just **2.4%**
- In **REF2014**, out of **191,000** outputs submitted, diverse outputs made up just **2.9%**.
- Of the **48,872** outputs submitted to Main Panel A in 2021, **99.7%** were journal papers.
- Of the **185,594** outputs submitted in **REF 2021**, **82%** were journal papers.
- Of the **195,000** outputs submitted in **RAE 1996**, **62%** were journal papers.

Glossary of Diverse Outputs (Updated Annex K REF2021)

- Edited books
- Book chapters
- Scholarly editions
- Monographs
- Journal Article
- Conference proceedings
- Working Papers
- External Research Reports
- External Confidential reports
- Research Data sets
- Architectural models
- Recordings
- Drama
- Design prototypes
- VR enabled content
- Reagents
- Digital Art
- Translations
- Curatorial projects
- Designs
- Choreographic material
- Food products/Processes
- Published geological maps
- Creative writings
- Dictionaries
- Films
- Music
- Apps
- Visual Media
- New materials
- Images
- Multi-component outputs
- Encyclopaedia entries
- Essays
- Policy summaries
- Practice based outputs
- Nontextual Artefacts
- Devices
- Produce
- Exhibitions
- Creative performance
- Patents
- Compositions
- Software and code
- Digital media



Diversity of Outputs from Practice Research

- **Artworks**
- **Performances**
- **Exhibitions and curatorial projects**
- **Design prototypes**
- **Collections**
- **Films, multimedia, and digital works**
- **Reflective or critical exegesis**
- **Narrative or ethnographic texts**
- **Documentaries and visual ethnographies**
- **Participatory media (e.g., community storytelling, digital archives)**
- **Creative writing**
- **Public history archives, sites and exhibitions**
- **Policy briefs.**
- **Social interventions**
- **Case studies and action research reports**
- **Educational tools and curricula**
- **Community-based interventions**
- **Practice guidelines or toolkits**
- **Co-produced artefacts (maps, models, frameworks)**
- **Engineering prototypes and technical designs**
- **Clinical practice innovations**
- **Software tools and simulations**
- **Environmental or health interventions**
- **Lab-based artefacts**
- **Experimental systems**
- **Technical reports**
- **Patents**

What Can REF Team Do to Reduce Sector Anxiety on Diverse Outputs?

- **Panel guidance is explicit**, not aspirational.
- **Clear, repeated messaging** to eliminate sector uncertainty.
- State explicitly that **diverse outputs will not be disadvantaged**.
- Panels will not **penalise format** where originality, significance and rigour are demonstrated.
- Accepting that calling for diverse output submissions ultimately requires:
 - **Trust** in panel expertise
 - **Trust** in criteria application
 - **Trust** that funding bodies genuinely value diversity of output.

What Can REF Team Do to Reduce Sector Anxiety on Diverse Outputs?

- Run structured listening **events where institutions can raise concerns** about specific output types.
- Confirm assessment **criteria are visibly format-neutral**.
- Ensure that cross-referral mechanisms are **clear and trusted**.
- Confirm that panels understand that assessment **criteria apply to CKU, not to the output format**.
- Populate **FAQs with explicit guidance** about diverse outputs
- Ensure **strategic oversight of diverse output assessment** at Main Panel Level

What Can HEIs Do to Reduce Internal Anxiety on Diverse Outputs?

- HEIs engage **external reviewers** who were panel members on previous REFs where the rules on diverse outputs were different.
- Include reviewers with experience of creative, practice-based, and other diverse research.
- Run mock REF exercises that **include non-traditional outputs**.
- Reinforce internal messaging that:
 - Assessment is about **quality, not traditional journal hierarchies**.
 - Diverse **does not mean lower status** or lower quality.
- Institutions should **avoid denigrating diverse outputs** in internal reviews.
- Senior leaders should **publicly back diverse submissions**.

What Can HEIs Do to Reduce Internal Anxiety on Diverse Outputs?

- Putting academics under internal pressure to only publish in high impact factored journals, **devalues and discriminates against other legitimate types of research outputs.**
- Encouraging **a diverse range of outputs reveal and reward** the full breadth of work contributing to university's vibrant research ecosystem.
- Ensure promotion, career progression and workload models **value diverse forms of scholarship.**
- Confidence begins at home; **if internal panels and leaders are sceptical, staff will self-censor.**

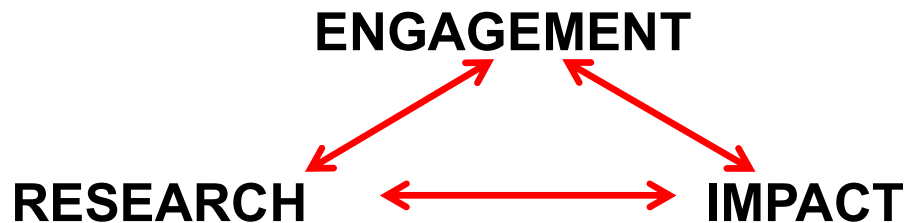


Research Diversity

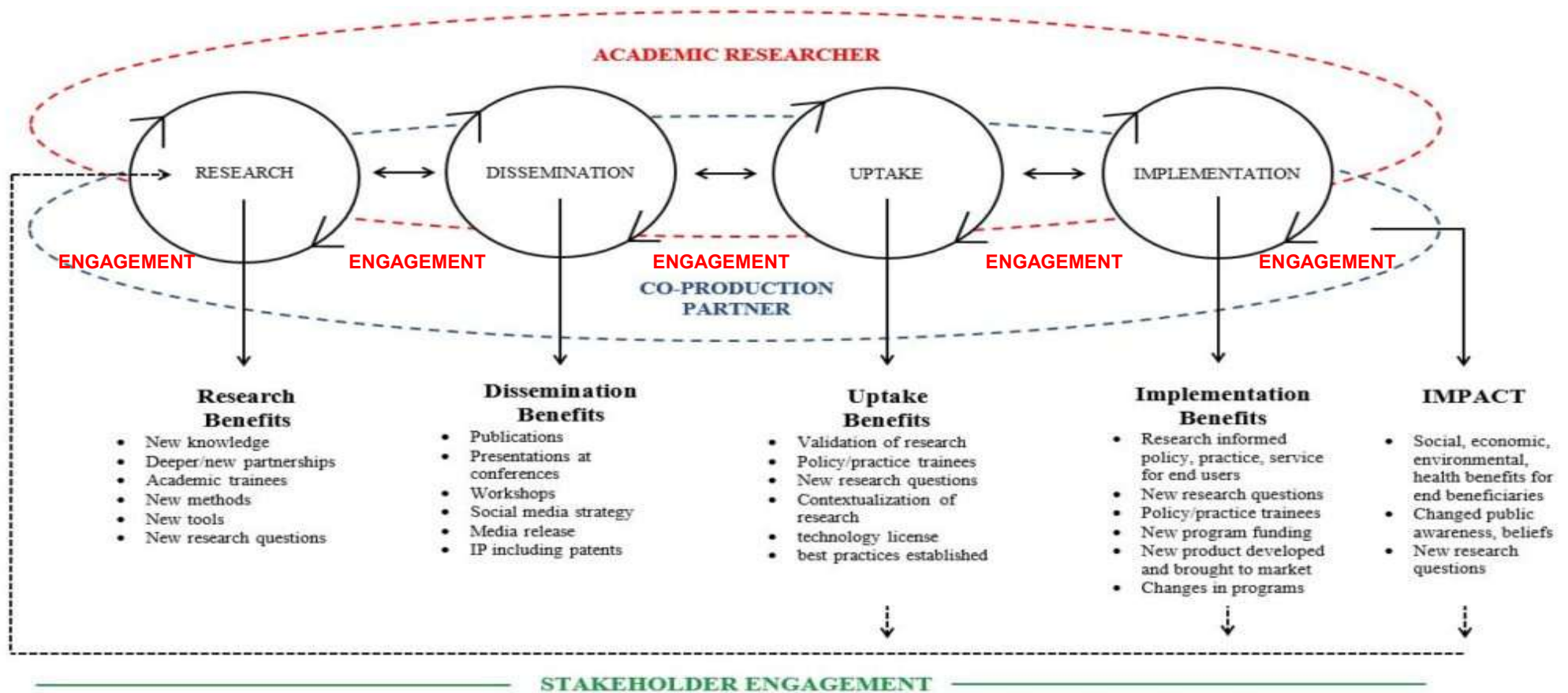
Engagement and Impact

Relationship Between Engagement and Impact

- **Engagement** is defined as an **interaction** between the HEI and relevant individuals, groups, communities, organisations, the public, commercial partners, or policy makers, that is **purposeful, responsible, and context appropriate**
- **Impact** is defined as an **effect on, change or benefit** to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia.
- REF2029 moves beyond assessing only demonstrable end effects to also valuing the interactions that make those effects possible.



Engagement Across the Research-Impact Continuum



Phipps, D.J., Cummings, J. Pepler, D., Craig, W. and Cardinal, S. (2016) The *Co-Produced Pathway to Impact* describes Knowledge Mobilization Processes. *J. Community Engagement and Scholarship*, 9(1): 31-40. (Adapted).

Three Questions on Engagement and Impact for ECRs

Question 1

- What are the potential impacts if this research is completed?

Question 2

- Who would be the beneficiaries of the research findings?

Question 3

- How can I best **engage** with these beneficiaries at the earliest possible opportunity?



Moving Impact from being an effect of research to being a purposeful engaged act planned for upstream.

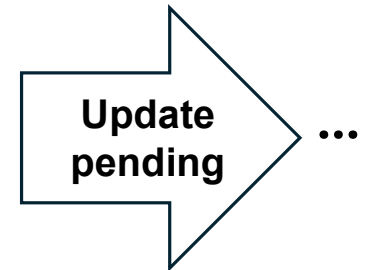
Engagement and Impact - In a Research Diversity Context

- **Impact diversity** refers to the **breadth of ways** in which research can reach and make a meaningful difference to a wide range of communities and actors.
- **Diverse engagement** practices encompass **different types of meaningful interaction** with a wide range of audiences and partners, across multiple settings and through various channels.
- REF2029 endorses this and will enable institutions to **submit a wider suite of impacts**. Submissions may include **highly varied cases** (e.g., interdisciplinary and trans-sectoral impacts, civic, and regional impacts, preventative impacts, creative and participatory impacts etc.).



Diverse Impacts: Annex A (REF2021)

- Health, Wellbeing & Animal Welfare
- Commerce & the Economy
- Technology
- Environment
- Quality of Life
- Understanding, Learning & Participation
- Legal.
- Creativity, Culture & Society
- Social Welfare
- Public Policy, Law & Services
- Production
- Practitioners & Professional Services
- Politics and Policy.



What Can HEIs Do to Excel at Engagement and Impact?

- **1. Start with the “why”**

Don't wait until a funding application to think about impact. Ask yourself **why your research matters – to whom** and how?

- **2. Know your stakeholder space**

Understand who your research could influence, benefit or challenge. Build relationships early and often and maintain those relationships for mutual benefit. **Impact is relational, not transactional.**

- **3. Co-create, don't just disseminate**

Share ownership of the research process. **Engage beneficiaries as collaborators, not just recipients.** See the value from both sides.

- **4. Document continuously**

Capture benefits of engagement as you go. Engagement and Impact aren't written from memory – they're built over time. Leaving it to the last minute might mean that beneficiaries have moved on.

- **5. Value impact as scholarship**

Challenge the narrative that “real” impact is only the result of what's published in journals. **Engagement and Impact both reflect scholarship.**

[Phippen and Rutt \(2025\) xploring Research Impact in Academia and Why It Matters](#)

What Can HEIs Do to Excel at Engagement and Impact?

- **Research managers have a key role to play** in helping regional partners understand the research ecosystem. This is something our colleagues working in knowledge exchange have long been successful at; impact managers should **strengthen their links with knowledge exchange staff**, learning from and working more closely with them to better understand and support those networks.
- *That is a huge additional incentive to form the effective partnerships and co-designed projects that tend to produce the highest quality and most impactful research. For a really compelling impact case study, **a long and close working relationship with partners and stakeholders is crucial**—giving access to quantitative and qualitative indicators to support the narrative. (Simon Kerridge, 2025)*

Impact Case Studies with no Apparent Engagement

- The presence of a Statement of Engagement **does not automatically increase score**. It is contextual evidence.
- **Case studies without engagement are not disadvantaged *per se*** — provided they demonstrate strong, evidenced impact clearly where the causal chain is robust?
- If engagement has been central to achieving the impact and **is not articulated, the case may feel thin**.
- If engagement is peripheral and impact is clearly evidenced through other mechanisms, **this can still score highly**.

Strategy, People and Research Environment

REF 2029 values:

- Research environments that **enable diverse and excellent research, outputs, engagement and impact.**
- Strategies and actions aimed at **enabling responsible practice and research diversity.**
- Submissions that are **representative of the range of research, impact and engagement across the unit.**
- Environments that **value and recognise research diversity** across the full range of practices, outputs and impact and engagement.



Statement of Representation (SoR)

- To mitigate concerns that full decoupling may lead to the under representation of research areas, research practices and research groups, a **Statement of Representation is required**.
- The SoR should indicate how the unit's submitted research **represents the research activity, topics, methods and practices of the unit**, regardless how broad or specialised the unit may be.
- It should justify how submitted outputs and associated reserve lists **represent the subject range and diversity of research activities** undertaken by the unit during the REF 2029 cycle.
- Where the submitted outputs and associated reserve list **do not fully demonstrate the diversity of the research** activity undertaken within the Unit, **this should also be explained in the SOR**.

How Should HEIs Interpret/ Demonstrate Representation

The Big Conceptual Shift

- REF 2021: Representativeness was tied to *people*.
- REF 2029: Representativeness is tied to the *research identity of the unit*.

A. Disciplinary Breadth- Does the output pool reflect:

- The main research themes?
- Major subfields and research groupings?
- Emerging areas identified in strategy?

B. Methodological and Output Diversity - Does the submission reflect:

- The range of research practices and methods used in the unit?
- Appropriate output types (monographs, articles, practice outputs, datasets, etc.)?

C. Strategic Alignment - Does the portfolio align with:

- The unit's stated research strategy?
- Investment areas?
- Environment narrative?

How Will the Indicative Maximum of 5 Outputs Help With Representation?

- The indicative maximum could help representativeness in three ways:

1. Prevents Extreme Concentration

- Without any cap, a UoA could theoretically submit a portfolio heavily dominated by a small number of highly productive researchers.

2. Forces Reflection, Not Redistribution

- If a unit genuinely has five outstanding outputs from one substantive link that define a major strategic research strand, that can be justified.

3. Supports Portfolio-Level Thinking

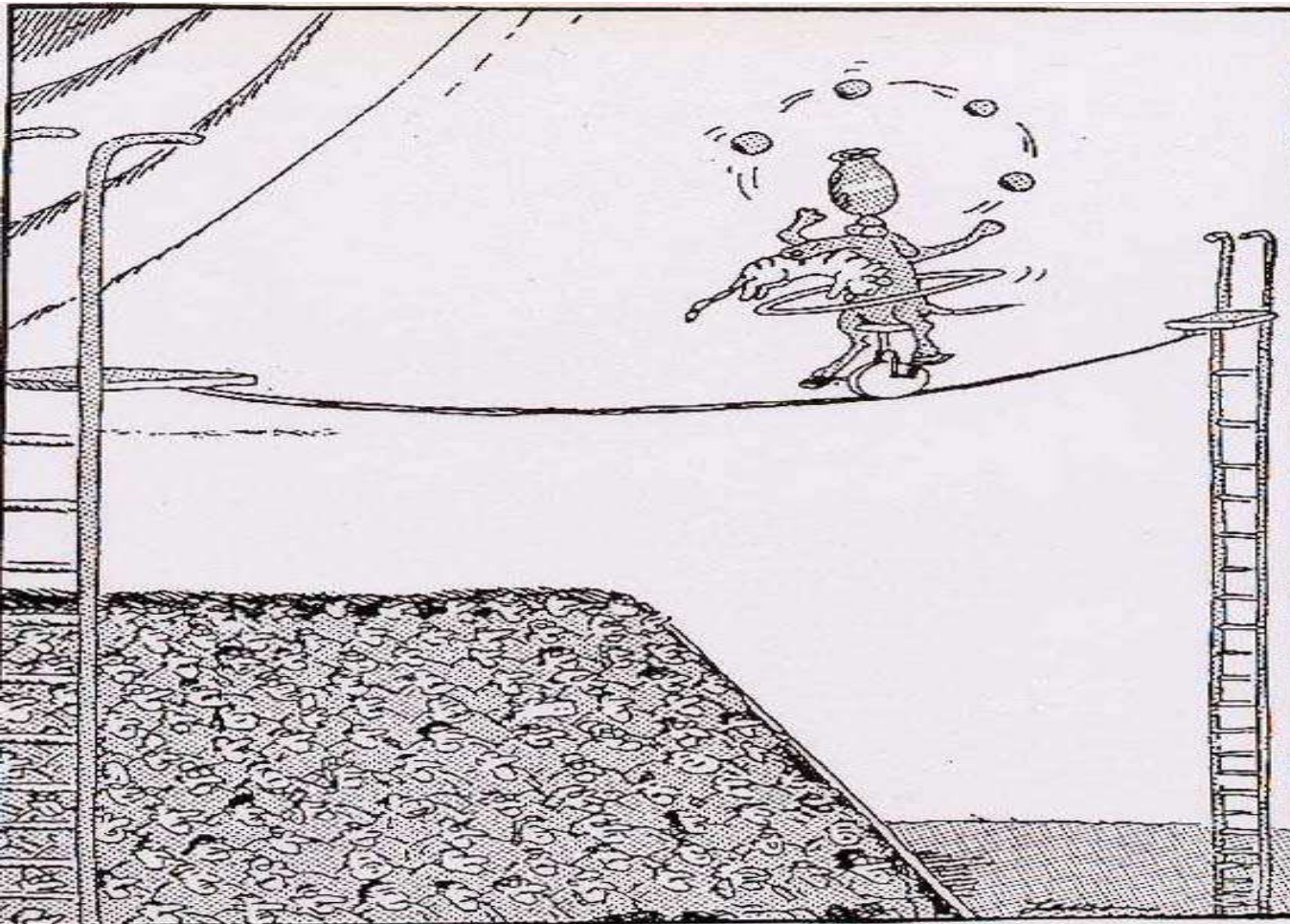
- The five-output indicator encourages UoAs to think in terms of:
 - Breadth of contribution
 - Coherence of strategic narrative.

Conclusions

- So, we face a paradox. REF 2029 has restructured the rules to encourage inclusivity and diversity in what is submitted. But the system may continue to operate as it always has. The same types of people, submitting the same types of outputs, judged by the same benchmarks, under the guise of a new assessment. **This is not inevitable.** Panel chairs could signal their willingness to consider a wider range of outputs, as well as make visible moves to convince higher education institutions that such contributions would be treated and judged fairly.
- With the help of RDAP, this is exactly what REF 2029 proposes to ensure



REF 2029 and Research Diversity



High above the hushed crowd, Rex tried to remain focused.

Still, he couldn't shake one nagging thought:

He was an old dog and this was a new trick.

(Gary Larson)