

REF 2028 | ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIETY'S IMPACT

A follow up to 'The Future of Interdisciplinary Research Beyond REF 2021', in light of the UK funding bodies 'Initial Decisions' on the design of REF 2028.

Background

In November 2021 The Physiological Society published *The Future of Interdisciplinary Research Beyond REF 2021*¹. The report examined long-standing concerns about the assessment of interdisciplinary research (IDR) – in particular, the potential for research assessment to under-recognise and undervalue IDR.

In this follow-up analysis we consider how the recommendations in the report compare to reports published after REF 2021 and to the initial decisions for REF 2028.

The report celebrated IDR, particularly for its growing importance in challenge-led and mission-driven research, and included recommendations for the next REF and relevant to wider issues affecting IDR, such as academic publishing.



In recognition of the influence of REF in driving change in the sector, it made specific recommendations for REF 2028:

- improving identification and reward of IDR;
- recognising the breadth of research teams involved in IDR;
- providing opportunities to contextualise IDR activities in narrative elements of submissions; and
- applying to wider practical use an improved understanding and characterisation of IDR.

Following the UK funding bodies' publication of *REF 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation*² this summer, The Physiological Society commissioned Research Consulting to review and assess the extent to which the initial decisions about REF 2028 reflect the recommendations regarding interdisciplinary research and REF in The Society's 2021 report.

This work also draws on reports published by the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel (IDAP), reflecting on the assessment of IDR in REF 2021, and the Future Research Assessment Programme (FRAP), which draws on the experience of REF 2021 to outline possible future directions for research assessment.

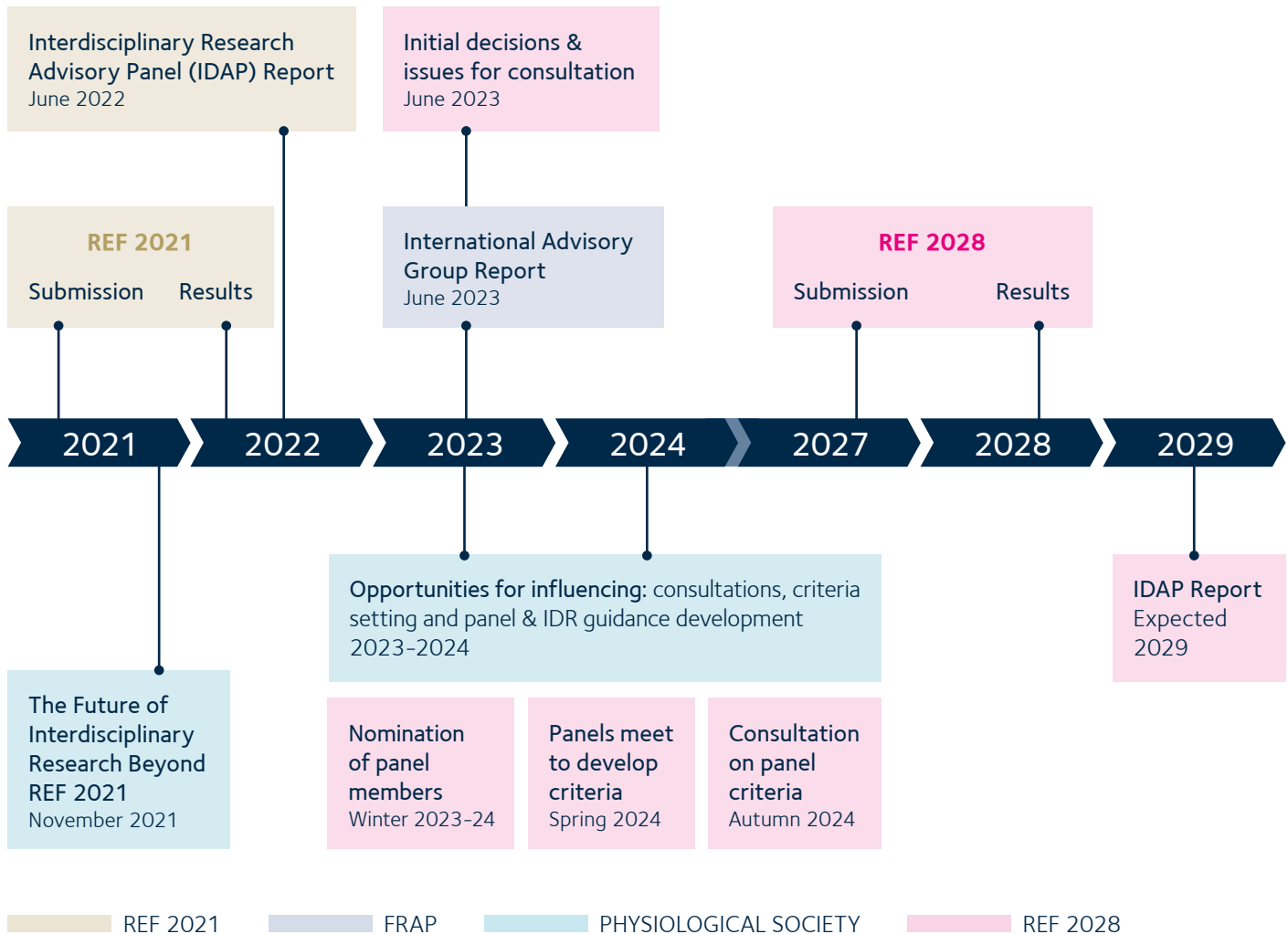
1. Published November 2021, *The future of interdisciplinary research beyond REF 2021*, www.physoc.org/policy/research-landscape-and-funding/interdisciplinary-research/

2. Published 15 June 2023, *REF 2028: initial decisions and issues for further consultation*, repository.jisc.ac.uk/9148/1/research-excellence-framework-2028-initial-decisions-report.pdf

Influencing IDR assessment in REF 2028

Figure 1 below presents key milestones and publications from the REF 2021 and FRAP processes and in the proposed REF 2028 timeline. This highlights the opportunities for influencing the development of REF 2028 criteria and guidance in relation to IDR over the next year.

Figure 1: REF 2021, FRAP and REF 2028 timeline



Over the next few months The Physiological Society will work with other organisations which share an interest in foregrounding IDR in REF 2028 to:

- Respond to consultations;
- Encourage interest in Panel roles, make nominations to these and brief on IDR priorities; and
- Use the criteria-setting phase to offer practical solutions to anticipated IDR challenges in REF 2028. This phase will define key terms such as “interdisciplinary research” in relation to REF 2028, developing or refining the REF 2021 definition; outline eligibility requirements for each element of submission; set criteria for assessment of each of the three elements of REF 2028 and for each of the four starred grades; define the parameters of each Unit of Assessment (UoA) and the areas of overlap between different UoAs; and define any variations in how individual main or sub-panels would apply the generic criteria within their work, or any supplementary criteria they would use.




Initial decisions reflecting the report recommendations

The Society’s 2021 report described why IDR matters, the drivers for it and the collaborations, people and teams which carry it out. Positively, the *Initial decisions* correlate with The Society’s recommendations by demonstrating an **increased focus on team science**, with an **expanded definition of excellence** and a stated aim to capture the contributions of a **wider range of researchers and research-enabling staff**. Changes between REF 2021 and REF 2028 include renamed elements of assessment and revised weightings, summarised in the table below.

ASSESSMENT ELEMENT	WEIGHTING	DESCRIPTION	ASSESSED THROUGH...
Contribution to knowledge and understanding (Outputs in REF 2021)	50% (down from 60% in REF 2021)	Scholarly outputs consistent with discipline-specific approaches to scholarly communication, showcasing the wide variety of research undertaken, recognising contributions that enable the research of others within the wider disciplinary community (e.g. datasets, software)	Outputs & structured explanatory statement in the Disciplinary Level statement
Engagement and impact (Impact in REF 2021)	25% (unchanged from REF 2021)	Recognise & reward the contribution of the research activities to society and the economy (impact) & a wider range of impact-enabling activities (engagement)	Impact case studies & impact narrative in the Disciplinary Level statement
People, culture and environment (Environment in REF 2021)	25% (up from 15% in REF 2021)	Research culture, career progression, open research practices, research robustness & reproducibility, overall environment, support structures, strategic direction & support for staff, use of resources, planning	Institution Level & Disciplinary Level statements

In REF 2028, all three elements of assessment will involve a structured narrative element, meaning that institutions will be able to contextualise their submissions, with potential for this to enhance the consideration of IDR in the assessment process. There will be a move away from assessment of individuals with opportunities to demonstrate support for IDR in both Institutional Level and Disciplinary Level statements.

However, in aiming to ensure that IDR is “fairly assessed and appropriately recognised and rewarded” the wording of the *Initial decisions* seems – in line with the approach in REF 2021 – to aim to mitigate against possible unfairness, rather than – as suggested by the FRAP International Advisory Group – to “incentivise” interdisciplinary research.

Positively, the *Initial decisions* correlate to at least some extent with
8 of the 10  recommendations from The Society’s report.

Mapping the recommendations of The Physiological Society’s The Future of Interdisciplinary Research Beyond REF 2021 to REF 2028: Initial decisions

Figure 2 illustrates the level of correlation using the following indicators of green, amber and red:

- The 2 green recommendations are those which appear to be **strongly reflected** in the *Initial decisions*, with the International Advisory Group Report (IAG) indicating a future direction of travel which also aligns with these.
- The 2 amber recommendations are **partially addressed** in the *Initial decisions*, although the IAG report also suggests a direction of travel which aligns with recommendation 10. However, it is likely that further elements of these can be incorporated into final criteria, guidance and working methods through proactive engagement with current and forthcoming consultation opportunities and during the criteria-setting phase (Spring–Autumn 2024).
- The 4 red recommendations are **weakly reflected** in the *Initial decisions*, but it is again likely that elements of these can be incorporated into final guidance through proactive engagement with consultation opportunities and during the criteria-setting phase.

Figure 2: Mapping the recommendations of The Physiological Society's [The Future of Interdisciplinary Research Beyond REF 2021](#) to [REF 2028: Initial decisions](#), contextualised with publications from REF 2021 ([Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel \(IDAP\): final report](#)) and from [FRAP](#) (Responsible use of technology in research assessment; REF outputs: maximising the use of REF data; and the International Advisory Group (IAG) report, which also suggests a direction of travel for research assessment beyond REF 2028.)

● STRONGLY REFLECTED
● PARTIALLY ADDRESSED
● WEAKLY REFLECTED

THE PHYSIOLOGICAL SOCIETY RECOMMENDATIONS NOVEMBER 2021	REF 2028 INITIAL DECISIONS JUNE 2023	PUBLICATIONS FROM REF 2021 (IDAP REPORT) AND FRAP JUNE 2022-23
<p>Recommendation 1: Explicitly identifies and rewards research that is founded on interdisciplinary approaches through:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • structure with flexibility for coherent evidence of IDR for themes relevant to the institution • university level case study to exemplify & contextualise environment • panels reviewing case studies to draw on academic & user experience 	<p>“recognising and rewarding a wider range of research activities, the next exercise will support the assessment of interdisciplinary research, whose processes & outputs do not necessarily follow traditional formats and may have been perceived as less likely to score well.”</p> <p>● -Use of institutional and disciplinary level statements</p>	<p>IDAP report: Consider mechanisms to assess the evidence base presented in unit-level and institutional environment submissions, and the extent to which this is reflected in other aspects of the submission, including impact case studies and outputs submitted.</p>
<p>Recommendation 2: Allow outputs from individuals whose research straddles UoAs to be returned to multiple UoAs recognising the breadth of the research teams in which they operate.</p>	<p>Decouple outputs from individuals; outputs can be submitted to multiple UoAs; wider recognition of breadth of research teams in PCE; enable submission of outputs authored by non-academic staff.</p>	<p>IDAP report: retain & further guidance on joint assessment & cross-referral; guidance and support for cross-UoA assessment.</p> <p><i>Responsible use of technology in research assessment</i> notes potential assessment variation of IDR outputs submitted to multiple UoAs.</p> <p>IAG report: Transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary outputs & impact are likely to involve multiple units & potentially institutions & the evaluation process must recognise & incentivise this.</p>
<p>Recommendation 3: Allow outputs which contain an option for an additional narrative to explain the interdisciplinary context of research outputs. This will support peer review of IDR and build on good practice elsewhere.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>Use of institutional and disciplinary level statements; wider types of outputs which can be submitted in CKU.</p>	
<p>Recommendation 4: Funding bodies undertake a substantive review of interdisciplinary research within REF 2021, expanding the scope of the Interdisciplinary Research Advisory Panel (IDAP) report.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>IDAP will form part of the REF 2028 panel structures & will report after the conclusion of REF 2028.</p>	<p>IDAP report completed and published without any expansion of scope.</p>
<p>Recommendation 5: Funding bodies should develop improved criteria and guidelines for IDR that will enhance the understanding of IDR sub-types. Understandable descriptions of sub- types of IDR can describe and differentiate between forms of IDR and REF.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>There will be scope for work during the criteria-setting phase.</p>	<p>IDAP report: build on definitions & guidance from REF 2021.</p> <p>IAG report: Define, support and develop better processes to incentivise and support inter- and transdisciplinary research. Issues extend beyond assessment to funders and employers.</p>
<p>Recommendation 6: Further work by a task group comprising representatives from UKRI, the publishing community and researchers involved in IDR to bring together understanding and knowledge gaps relating to data-driven assessment criteria evidence for interdisciplinary research.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>Assessment outcomes will continue to be based on expert review, informed by indicators where appropriate. As in previous exercises, work will be undertaken to ensure that metrics are used responsibly in adherence with international good practice.</p>	<p>REF outputs: <i>maximising the use of REF data</i> shows feasibility of using disciplinary diversity (dd) of authors and dd of references as metrics to indicate IDR, in place of the IDR flag.</p>
<p>Recommendation 7: UKRI design evaluation approaches to the COVID-19 research response to inform how national research assessment can better reflect interdisciplinary and mission- or challenge-led research.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>Retain the statements on COVID impact, current consultation includes question about what this should cover.</p>	<p>IAG report: “wicked problems” require evidence from different disciplines... the Unit of Assessment structure may drive disciplinary homogenisation, not interdisciplinary diversity.</p>
<p>Recommendation 8: Funding bodies and publishers work together to identify specific measures to enhance capacity and capability for interdisciplinary peer review.</p>	<p>OUT OF SCOPE OF REF 2028: These recommendations relate to support for IDR within the wider research ecosystem, including amongst funding bodies, publishers and professional and learned societies.</p>	
<p>Recommendation 9: Professional and learned societies develop activities to support and facilitate the development of interdisciplinary collaborations with ‘near and far’ disciplines.</p>		
<p>Recommendation 10: Professional and learned societies, working with stakeholders including universities, research users and UKRI should instigate a study to provide further evidence on how engagement in interdisciplinary research shapes research careers, within and beyond academia.</p>	<p>●</p> <p>Team science, research careers, engagement with external partners and role of research-enabling staff form part of expanded elements of assessment, including wider eligibility of outputs for submission.</p>	<p>IAG report: Inter- & transdisciplinary research seen as risky for ECRs, IDR teams require range & integration of expertise & involvement of societal & enterprise stakeholders.</p>