

# Does REF have a sustainable future?

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## Does the Research Excellence Framework (REF) have a sustainable future?

**The results of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) for 2021 have just been revealed – the first since 2014. REF is a UK-wide assessment carried out by four education funding bodies, assessing over 76,000 academics at 157 universities. The final ranking determines the amount of quality-related research (QR) funding that universities receive from the Government each year for the next seven years.**

While many have opted to celebrate the stronger diversity of nationwide results this year, the overall system has also been heavily criticised by unions and independent researchers. In the week that followed the results on 12 May, we analysed the trending areas of discussion among 133 journalists across 515 UK-based publications, alongside 34 journalists across 102 international media outlets.

### Strong Distribution of ‘World-leading’ Research

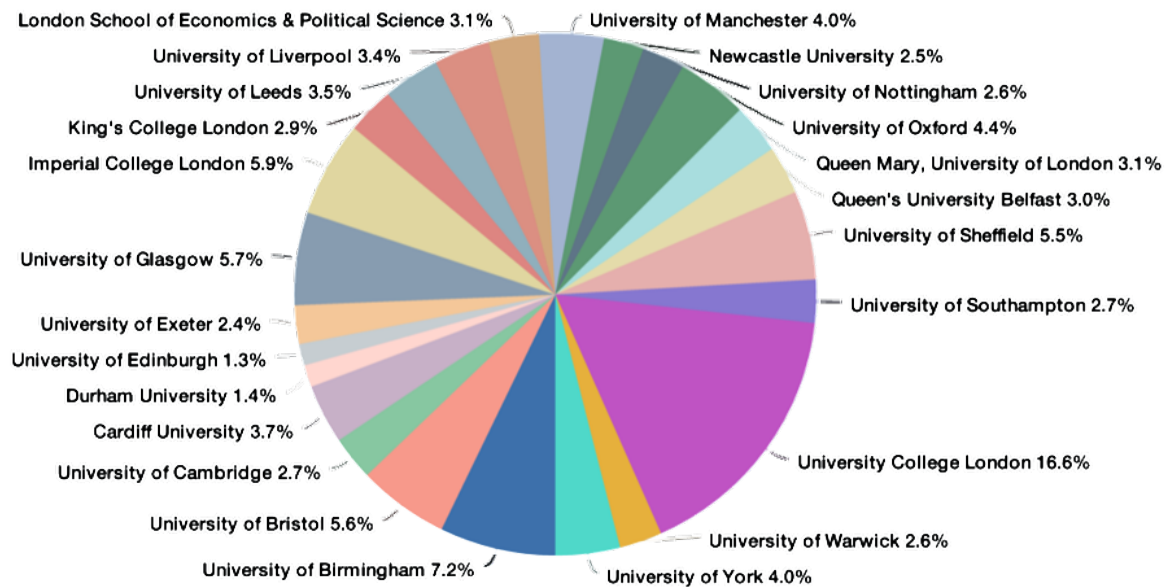
84% of UK research assessed by REF has been dubbed as 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent'. Oxford University had the highest volume of world-leading research and made the largest submission of research compared with any other university, submitting more than 3,600 researchers in 29 subject areas. ([Mail Online, 12.05.22](#)).

The term ‘northern powerhouse’ was trending in the first two days, with 162 articles referencing the strong representation of highly ranked universities in northern regions of the UK. The leading example was University of Northumbria, which was mentioned 189 times for soaring from 52nd to 28th in market share of future funding. Of this selection, 90% of all articles featured a quote from Andrew Wathey, Northumbria’s vice-chancellor, who commented that the achievement will move them ‘into territory formerly the preserve of the Russell Group’ ([The Independent, 12.05.22](#)). As a result, the ‘golden triangle’ universities have lost 2.4 percentage points since the 2014 REF results, a statistic shared 85 times by both regional and national publications.

Similarly, Scottish universities received strong prominence due to every institution in the region delivering ‘world-leading’ research ([The National, 12.05.22](#)). Among the 62 Scotland-focused articles across several UK news sources, 23% featured the terms ‘Scottish universities’ and ‘world-leading research’ in their headlines.

## Share of Voice: Russell Group Universities

On social media, UCL took the lead with a 16.6% share of all content regarding REF. As a 'golden triangle' university that often holds a place in the top five, UCL have a dedicated Twitter page (@UCLREF) that would be a major contributor to this high-volume output:



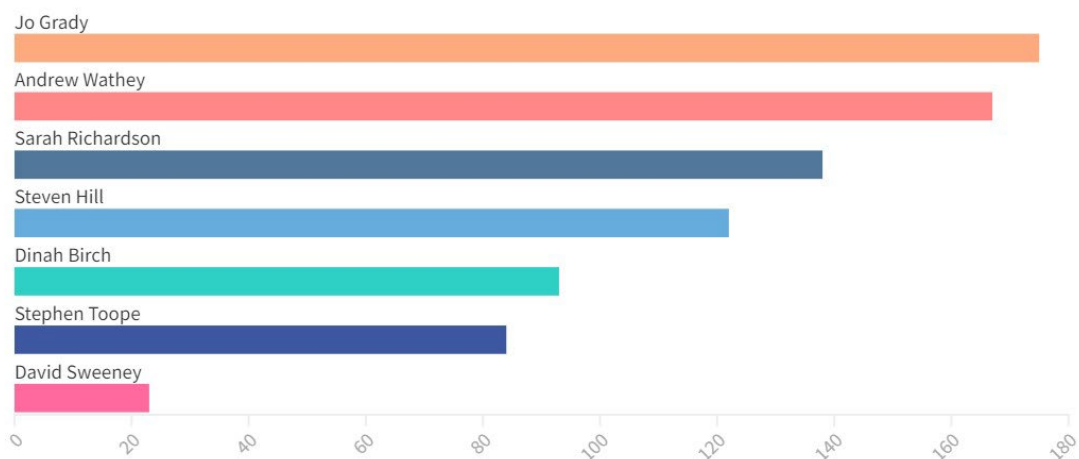
## Diversity and the 'Levelling-Up' Agenda

As REF results are only released every seven years, a leading point of discussion in this cycle has been the 'even spread' of success in all four nations across the country ([Mail Online, 12.05.22](#)). This term has been used 155 times across UK and international media outlets, highlighting newfound diversity and funding allocated to universities outside the Russell Group.

The Government has used this opportunity to outline how such results support the 'levelling-up' agenda, a seven-year plan to reduce (primarily economical) imbalances and increase public investment in areas outside the Southeast of England by 40%. The agenda has been mentioned 164 times by national news and business publications, as well as in a small percentage of coverage in North America, Australia and New Zealand. 96% of this coverage featured a quote from Steven Hill at Research England, and subsequent Chair of the REF steering group: 'There's lots of myths about where our research excellence is, but the truth is that it is more broadly distributed, as the results from this exercise show', adding that the UK research system is 'well placed to meet the Government's ambitions for levelling up' ([New Scientist, 12.05.22](#)). An article by The Independent, titled 'University research triumphs will help with levelling up agenda', was syndicated 143 times by local and regional press such as *The Reading Chronicle*, *Cotswold Journal* and *South Wales Argus*.

# Hidden Layers of Inequity

## Share of Voice: Prominence of REF Opinions



While almost 78% of coverage shares either a positive headline, themes or 'levelling-up', many unions and independent researchers have described the REF process as a 'bureaucratic nightmare' which can 'entrench inequality' given how the results impact funding allocations ([Evening Standard, 11.05.22](#)). Dr Jo Grady, General Secretary at University and College Union (UCU), has the strongest share of voice for those in opposition of REF. Grady's critique has been quoted 93 times since the results were released on 12 May, also taking to Twitter to expand her reach:

**UCU** @ucu

REF is emblematic of a research culture obsessed with designating universities & departments as "winners" or "losers".

Instead of vice chancellors fawning over today's [#REF2021](#) results & hijacking the work of their staff, they should address the crisis in our universities.

“ The UK is home to outstanding researchers and produces world leading research, year in, year out. But REF remains a flawed, bureaucratic nightmare, emblematic of a culture obsessed with arbitrarily designating departments as 'winners' or 'losers'. It is a drain on the time and resources of university staff. Rather than hijacking their hard work, university bosses would do well to address the reality for those in research. Almost 3 in 4 researchers want to leave higher education. It is utterly hypocritical for management to fawn over today's results without addressing the low pay and poor working conditions that leave many planning a career elsewhere. ”

Jo Grady, UCU general secretary

[www.ucu.org.uk/join](http://www.ucu.org.uk/join)

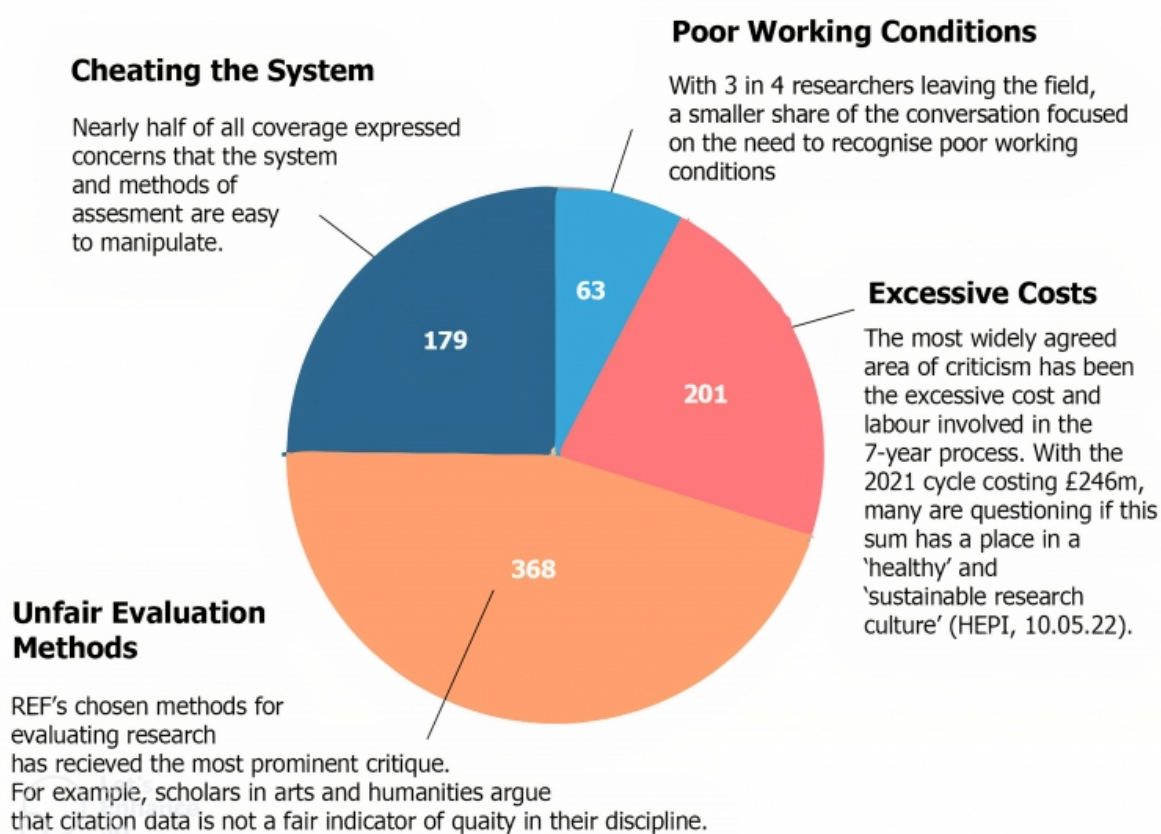
**UCU**

12:13 pm · 12 May 2022 · Twitter for iPhone

109 Retweets 7 Quote Tweets 290 Likes



## Trending Areas of Criticism in UK Media



Multiple trending areas of controversy have emerged in and out of UCU, primarily being:

### Poor Working Conditions

With almost three in four researchers set to leave higher education, multiple unions across the UK have described the celebrations as 'unfair' and ignorant ([Daily Mail, 12.05.22](#)). UCU released a public statement describing vice chancellors as 'utterly hypocritical' after 'severe cuts' to researcher pensions, adding that they are 'hijacking and seeking to capitalise on the hard work of research and academic related staff' ([UCU, 12.05.22](#)).

### Excessive Cost on Public Funds

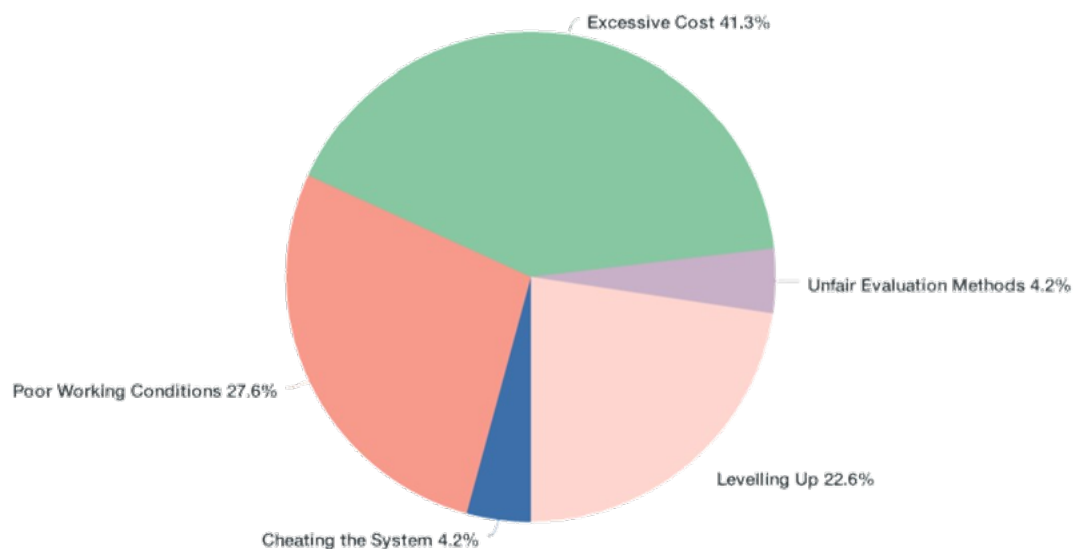
While the ethics and structure behind REF have been heavily debated, one aspect that most parties agree with is the excessive administrative burdens and use of public funds. Between just the 2008 and 2014 exercises, costs increased from £66 million to £246 million. A combination of 31 university new sources, education journals and regional news publications have shared their concerns, leading some members of REF funding councils to recognise the 'radical shake up' that may be necessary to create a sustainable and 'healthy research culture' ([Nature, 12.05.22](#)). A professor at Cambridge University added that the costs exceed far beyond monetary value – the REF now 'looms over the daily lives of institutions and individuals like a massive headache' ([HEPI, 10.05.22](#)).

## Unfair Evaluation Methods

Approaches used to assess university research have also been questioned, as many requirements are not attainable in all disciplines. For example, use of citation data is cautioned as an indicator of quality. Scholars in arts, humanities and many social sciences are particularly critical of this approach, not least because many publications in these fields extend well beyond traditional academic journals into books and physical objects (to include, for example, paintings). Catriona Firth, the associate director for research environment at Research England, is one of many who believes this has a negative impact on the type of work carried out at universities: 'What institutes think is going to be valuable in the REF is what they encourage staff to do and what they invest in' ([Nature, 12.05.22](#)). Another argued that the process was 'dampening initiative and originality', replacing 'the object of desire (good research) with its proxy' for the sake of a higher ranking ([HEPI, 10.05.22](#)).

## REF Critique on Social Media

Similarly to what we saw within traditional media, there was a strong critique of REF across social media too. Excessive costs and poor working conditions had the strongest voices in this debate:



## Political Engagement

This year's REF results have cut through to Parliament with an Early Day Motion being tabled to congratulate the University of Dundee on its performance by the SNP. Elsewhere, Paul Howell MP congratulated Northumbria University on its leap to No23 in the latest ranking. Daniel Zeichner MP spoke of the exercise as evidence of UK universities success, arguing this should be the focus of the Government instead of the 'stoking [of] culture wars' which has dominated debate in recent years.

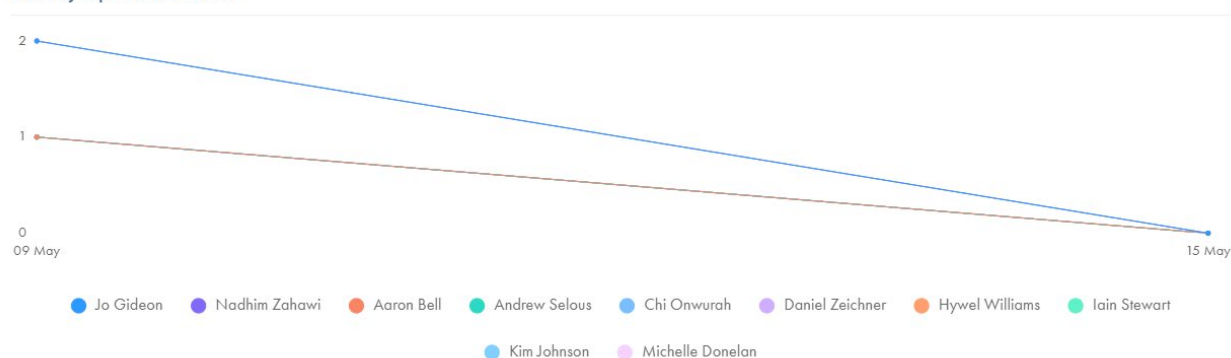
The framework received criticism in the House of Lords, with Viscount Hanworth referring to it as part of a burdensome audit culture. Blogs posted on the Higher Education Policy Institute reiterated that it is a 'highly complex system of assessment', but did caution that reforms should not aim not to throw the baby out the bath water.

The University and College Union were also critical, drawing comparisons between universities celebrating their REF results with the reality for university staff, two-thirds of which they say 'are considering leaving the sector'.

## MP Engagement

Professor Geoff Rodgers noted the obligatory celebrations of Universities post- REF results are one of the most important aspects of the design of the whole exercise for the sector's interaction with the Government. However, given only 10 MPs tweeted a total of 13 tweets about REF in response to their local universities' success, there may still be some way to go.

Trend by Top Twitter Authors



## The Future of REF: 2028



The future of REF is uncertain. While steps towards the ‘levelling-up’ agenda suggest more diverse funding opportunities, Nick Hillman, director of the Higher Education Policy Institute, warned that there was ‘no consensus on the value of the REF’. The Labour Party has described the REF as ‘discredited’ and the current shadow minister for science, research and innovation, Chi Onwurah, has complained it ‘encourages a cut-throat environment’, calling instead for more ‘strategic direction from the Government’ and ‘a more equitable funding formula’ ([University News, 13.05.22](#)).

Moreover, Peter Mandler, professor of Modern Cultural History at the University of Cambridge, believes REF is ‘no longer all that much about excellence or even about research’. In his blog with HEPI, he described the ‘sketchy’ assessment of university impact and environment as a ‘dirty secret’ within the REF system, adding that the whole process is less of a research assessment and ‘more of a public-relations assessment exercise’. Though a professor at one of the ‘golden triangle’ universities, Mandler is one of many in favour of the radical shake-up – or beyond that, to simply ‘rip up the rulebook and start again’ ([HEPI, 10.05.22](#)).





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