

COMMENTARY



Research excellence in a world of change

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Abstract

This commentary is in response to the proposed changes in the United Kingdom Research Excellence Framework (UK REF) 2029 and the potential implications on Hong Kong beyond the upcoming Research Assessment Exercise (Hong Kong RAE) 2026. Defining research excellence in a world of change is challenging and debatable. The suggested changes in UK REF 2029 are numerous and structural, ranging from changing the relative importance of the components of research excellence to a re-conceptualisation of the scope, structure, and assessment criteria of each component. The issues are complex and the implications are wide-ranging. A wider awareness among the research community and an in-depth dialogue with the relevant authorities about the proposed changes are urgently needed.

KEYWORDS

Hong Kong, Hong Kong RAE 2026, research environment, research impact, research outputs, UK REF 2029

How does the quality of research in a specific university compare to its peers in the same country? How can one move research in higher education towards a more desirable state through a national assessment framework? The first question has often been raised by higher education institutions (HEIs) and their constituent units of assessment (UOAs), such as Departments, Schools, Faculties and Divisions. The second question has been asked primarily by the government and society, reflecting their expectations on research, especially due to the large amount of public funding spent on HEIs at the national level. In essence, the national research assessment itself represents a form of government action and can lead to further government interventions to steer HEIs towards meeting national goals. While these two core questions are framed differently, they have to be answered with respect to a shared definition of research excellence.

Hong Kong has been following the national assessment framework of the United Kingdom (UK) with some time lags. It underwent the first territory-wide Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 1993, with the latest completed in 2020. The upcoming RAE is scheduled for 2026. In Hong Kong, the assessment has been called the RAE throughout these exercises, despite the renaming of the exercise in the UK from RAE (the last one in 2008) to the Research Excellence Framework (REF) in 2014. Notwithstanding the name change, the spirit of the UK national research assessment framework has remained unchanged, that is, to inform the four higher education funding bodies about

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the quality and impact of UK universities in all disciplines and to inform their funding decisions. In other words, the national assessment framework not only serves as a useful internal reference for HEIs to judge their research performance compared to their peers but also affects funding decisions crucial for all UK HEIs. It is a means for the national government to steer research in HEIs towards a more desirable state from the perspective of society at large. Reading from the aim of REF, 2014, there were clear expectations for the UK research sector to make ‘a major contribution to economic prosperity, national wellbeing and the expansion and dissemination of knowledge’. As such, the relative weights of the three research excellence components then were set at 65% for Research Outputs (ROs), 20% for Research Impact (RI) and 15% for the Research Environment (RE). In Hong Kong, the 2020 RAE essentially followed this rationale and definition of research excellence.

In pursuance of making research more relevant to society, the UK REF 2021 gave a heavier emphasis on RI (UKRI, 2023). Along this path, the upcoming Hong Kong RAE 2026 will see a change of relative weights, with 60% for ROs, 25% for RI, and 15% for RE. Given the decision of not delaying the UK REF 2021 under the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple changes in the timeframes, additional published guidance and contingency plans have been made (see ‘Index of revisions to the “Guidance on submissions” (2019/01) (UKRI, 2023)’). These procedural and administrative adjustments have somehow overshadowed the shift in the definition of research excellence from individual research outputs (with a reduced weight of ROs from 65% to 60%) to the societal impact of research efforts (with a heavier weight of RI from 20% to 25%). The Hong Kong RAE 2026 is already on the horizon. Local HEIs and UOAs have been busy preparing submissions according to the revised weights of 60% for ROs, 25% for RI, and 15% for RE. Yet, it is noteworthy to highlight that the UK REF 2029 will further change. The proposed changes are substantial and structural. In particular, the UK has already published initial decisions and issues for the next REF (see ‘Research Excellence Framework 2028: (UKRI, 2024) Initial Decisions and Issues for Further Consultation (REF 2028/23/01)’), with an ambitious aim of ‘redesigning the UK’s national research assessment exercise’ by reshaping incentives within the research system and rethinking ‘what should be recognised and rewarded’ (paragraph 4). This document (REF 2028/23/01) also forms the basis for this Commentary. As the topic is still being debated in the UK, it is noteworthy that further changes may be made (UKRI, 2024).

If one revisits the definition of research excellence, its meaning differs among different stakeholders. Where no national assessment framework exists (e.g., in the United States), striving for individual research excellence still prevails. This is because individual researchers are being rewarded in different ways through higher salaries, job satisfaction, and/or academic reputation. Common aspirations among researchers include the publication of research findings, the training of research students, and the delivery of keynote speeches. Currently, the salary of a faculty member at a given HEI is related to the ROs of individual researchers in one way or another, although the actual weight may vary depending on the relative emphasis of specific institutions on teaching, research, knowledge exchange, services, and other leadership roles. ROs constitute a major consideration in all faculty recruitment exercises and the subsequent promotion and tenure systems. In other words, there exists a market mechanism which drives individual researchers to excellence.

Nonetheless, the RI of a researcher or a group of researchers in revolutionising the practice of entire professions/industries and/or significantly improving the wellbeing of citizens in a country and beyond (such as through the discovery of new drugs) may need a much longer period to realise than that typically considered in the annual job performance reviews of individual researchers. RI requires significant time and commitment from researchers, notably in advising and serving professional and government committees on a pro bono basis. Such long-term efforts in engaging and working with the profession, industry, government, and/or the community may not directly lead to new ROs of individual researchers. Here, making the relevance of research known to society directly is key. Unless the RI can be monetised (e.g., with HEIs allowing researchers to set up companies more freely), it is difficult to ensure that the research sector will devote sufficient attention to research that has a significant impact on society. While the intention of RI is to promote the relevance of research to society as a relatively independent component (vs ROs and RE), the actors who sit in the governing bodies of national research assessments matter. If they are the same actors who define the excellence of ROs, the RI component may still fail to address the lack of impact of research on the wider community beyond the existing benchmarks used to assess ROs.

Yet, RE is probably the least well-defined research excellence component. Does a UOA provide an environment that grooms future generations of researchers, and enables a vibrant research community that is active both domestically and internationally? Certainly, an affirmative answer is a sign of research excellence and is key to the long-term growth of the UOA. Nonetheless, this component is difficult to define. So far, HEIs considered to have an excellent RE tend to be those that have strong PhD programmes with high-quality students and alumni. The reasons for successful PhD programmes, however, cannot be separated from the ROs and RI of individual researchers because many excellent PhD candidates prefer to work with ‘star researchers’ and in big laboratories, which, in turn, pave the way for their future academic

advancement. Furthermore, the social infrastructure in an institutional context and the spillover of tacit knowledge and social support are also relevant so that researchers in HEIs can avoid working in an environment of cut-throat competition, which is not conducive to creativity and innovation.

For the proposed UK REF 2029, there will be a much heavier emphasis on RE, which will be elaborated and described as People, Culture and Environment (PCE). A higher weight on PCE (25%) is associated with further erosions of the importance of ROs, which measure individual researchers' excellence. The new framework also transforms the ROs and RI components as Contribution to Knowledge and Understanding (K&U) (50%) and Engagement and Impact (E&I) (25%), respectively. K&U will include not only ROs of individual researchers but also a structured explanatory statement at the discipline level, which will make up at least 10% of the score of this sub-profile. Furthermore, there is a relaxation on the eligibility of staff submitting ROs for evaluation, the type of research outputs, and the maximum number of ROs submitted by an individual. These proposed changes in ROs are fundamental. They re-open age-long debates, which include 'What is research?', 'Who is a researcher?', and 'Where can research excellence be found?' For instance, should a consultancy report be considered an RO? Similarly, E&I has been extended from impact case studies to include an explanatory statement (with evidence) on the 'wider contribution of the research activities to society and the economy' (REF 2028/23/01, paragraph 52) (UKRI, 2024). The latter should weigh no less than 20% of the score of this sub-profile. Although the previous ROs and impact case studies have been maintained, they may become drastically different depending on the consultation results. Furthermore, apart from PCE, both K&U and E&I will be heavily affected by 'explanatory statements', which are not 'ready-made' (e.g., by extracting from the University Vision statement or by selecting items from a list of research publications) but need to be carefully developed and written for the REF. Specifically, the submissions will consist of an institution-level evidence-based statement (primarily counted towards PCE) and a disciplinary-level evidence-based statement (contributing to all three components of research excellence).

Whether the next HK RAE after 2026 will continue to follow the UK's footsteps is still uncertain. However, it is worthwhile to highlight some points for further discussion based on the three components of research excellence. For an assessment to serve its purpose, the eligibility, evaluation criteria, and scoring/star system must be clear and commonly understood. Previous experiences have allowed experienced researchers and former RAE panel members to say rather confidently whether an RO is 2-stars or 4-stars. While identifying someone versed in all fields of a discipline is not realistic, the Research Grant Council in Hong Kong, which oversees the local RAEs, has addressed the issue by promoting diversity within each panel (including the Chair, Deputy Chair, and members) and by inviting relevant members of other panels for advice. Within each panel, panel members are recruited to cover different research areas so that each panel member will only judge submissions relevant to his/her expertise. The appointment of panel members also takes into account the nature of expected submissions from local institutions. In geography, while there is no expert versed in all three fields of physical geography, human geography, and geospatial sciences, multiple geographers, each with a different specialisation, can be appointed. Inviting members of other panels to review, known as a referral request, is also commonplace in Hong Kong RAEs. A key problem, however, is that the UOAs may not align with disciplinary boundaries. For instance, research in a Geography Department may be considered by multiple UOA panels, ranging from Physical Sciences, the Built Environment, and Social Sciences. How to define and align the UOA panels with the organisational structures of local universities remains a debatable topic in Hong Kong.

With the RAEs prevailing in Hong Kong ever since 1993, most newly recruited researchers in a local HEI would be advised to start preparing for four top-scoring ROs as a contribution to the next RAE of the UOA. Under the current Hong Kong RAE system, every eligible staff member is important as the number of ROs submitted by each member is the same. New recruits also know for sure whether they are to be included in a certain RAE or not because there are clear cut-off dates of eligibility. For the Hong Kong RAE 2026, it primarily means a full-time appointment for a continuous period of at least 36 months covering the census date, i.e., 30 September 2025, and the employment start date cannot be later than 1 September 2023 (UGC, 2023). With regard to the updated K&U (previously RO) component, the UK REF 2029 is suggesting that there will no longer be a limit on the number of ROs that a member can submit and that new members of a UOA can be included as long as attachments to the HEIs can be proved. Essentially, an RO may be 'produced by anyone employed by the institution on a minimum 0.2 FTE contract for at least six months in the REF assessment period' (REF 2028/23/01, paragraph 74) (UKRI, 2024). In other words, a senior member can be recruited near the RAE and be submitting an unlimited number of ROs for the UOA. Compared to the current RAE/REF system, does it reflect the true spirit of inclusivity and diversity? Does this proposed change reflect the research excellence of the UOA better than the current system that every eligible member of the UOA is treated equally and must submit an equal number of ROs? There is a risk that the ROs submitted for evaluation are no longer representative of the overall strength of the UOA but are dominated by a few established or newly recruited 'star researchers'.

Looking back at the Hong Kong RAE 2020, collecting evidence to support impact case studies has been very challenging. With hindsight, researchers have to form an early judgement on whether a certain research output may have the potential to generate significant societal impact and be selected as an impact case study in a future RAE. Without an early awareness, the research team might neither have sought institutional support/endorsement letters nor have collected evidence of engagement activities with the government, the industry, and the general public. Following the UK REF 2021's heavier weight of RI (from 20% to 25%) (UKRI, 2023), many UOAs in Hong Kong have actively recognised and supported teamwork among their members to make an impact in specific domains of their expertise. More human and financial resources have been devoted to facilitate and support the collection of evidence for impact case studies. In the Hong Kong RAE 2026, the Research Grant Council has started to appoint lay panel members from the industry and the non-academic sector to help evaluate impact case studies. This helps to ensure that RI will not be judged by the same group of stakeholders who define the excellence of ROs. However, adjustments take time and, at best, the local research community in Hong Kong is only grappling with the shifting emphasis to RI in this round. If Hong Kong follows the UK's footsteps, the proposed addition of a structured explanatory statement of engagement and impact in the UK REF 2029 will reduce the weight of the impact case studies in a de facto manner. Yet, what evidence is needed to substantiate the E&I explanatory statement? Can we truly say one form of engagement (e.g., a town hall session) is better than another (e.g., a focus group discussion)? What would make a 2-star or 4-star E&I statement?

Finally, the research environment component in Hong Kong RAEs has always been considered supplementary (15%) in determining research excellence. This component has encouraged a UOA to celebrate its people (including the successes of its PhD students/alumni and notable research awards), facilities, and research strategies. Yet, if the weight is to drastically increase to 25%, the criteria can no longer be so loose. On the way forward, there are two key issues. One is to clearly define the PCE criteria, incorporating diversity and inclusion. Second is to establish a fair playing ground, notably finding ways of clearly distinguishing PCE from general international university rankings, such as the Times Higher Education (THE) and the QS World University Rankings. On the first issue, having a research culture that is inclusive and welcoming for female academics to excel and to lead should be prioritised in Hong Kong. While gender equality has been achieved through the recruitment and promotion systems in many HEIs in the UK, female academics are grossly under-represented in top management positions of universities in Hong Kong. Given that women are not inherently inferior in ability, this imbalance is often related to PCE and has to be addressed. Similarly, a collaborative culture which encourages teamwork and collegiality should be valued as the soft infrastructure of RE. Besides, as geographers, we are aware of the critical importance of the local context. Hong Kong has been a global city under British rule from 1841 to 1997. Since the political handover to China, its role in China's national development has still been closely linked to the city's established advantages as an international business centre and a global transport and logistics hub, with 'co-operation and exchanges with countries and regions around the world' (Hong Kong SAR Government, 2024) (UKRI, 2023). In relation, internationalisation should be a key aspect of defining an excellent research environment in Hong Kong, while it may not be directly relevant in the context of the UK.

On the second issue, there is an urgent need to define and agree on a fair and transparent grading system (with specific grade/star descriptors) separately for institutions and disciplines. How do we evaluate a research culture? To be named a 'culture', members of the HEIs or UOAs must share it. A sense of identity/belonging has never been formally adopted in a national research assessment framework. Given that the research culture has been embedded in an institution since its establishment, each university has its own research culture which may not be directly comparable. Furthermore, if this weight is to be increased, we must be aware that PCE inherently has a scale effect. A larger UOA/HEI, with more resources and facilities, is more likely to attract a substantial size of good-quality PhD students and to organise meaningful activities for them, for example. In other words, the top-ranking HEIs are likely to score well in terms of research environment. With such a heavy emphasis on PCE, it is even more difficult for the weaker and smaller HEIs to catch up (e.g., through excellent ROs) and realise the underpinning core values of inclusivity and diversity of research excellence, which triggered the redesign and rethinking of the UK REF 2029 in the first place.

In conclusion, defining research excellence in a world of change is challenging. Given the significance of the national assessment framework in informing funding, every change in the details of the framework can trigger fundamental changes in the higher education sector, including recruitment, promotion, and tenure. The suggested changes in UK REF 2029 are numerous and structural, ranging from changing the relative importance of the components of research excellence to a re-conceptualisation of the scope, structure, and assessment criteria of each component. The issues are complex and the implications are wide-ranging. In particular, various unintended outcomes of the greater emphasis over successive rounds of research assessments on research impact and the research environment – if not well defined and agreed among stakeholders – can be a potential source for individual researcher-level grievances and institution-level

'strategic gaming', whether in Hong Kong or the UK. A wider awareness among the research community and an in-depth dialogue with the relevant authorities about the proposed changes are urgently needed.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

All information used is publicly available.

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