MANCHESTER 1824
The University of Manchester
Alliance Manchester Business School

PRODUCING A 4* RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT

(A UK PERSPECTIVE)

Mark Healey

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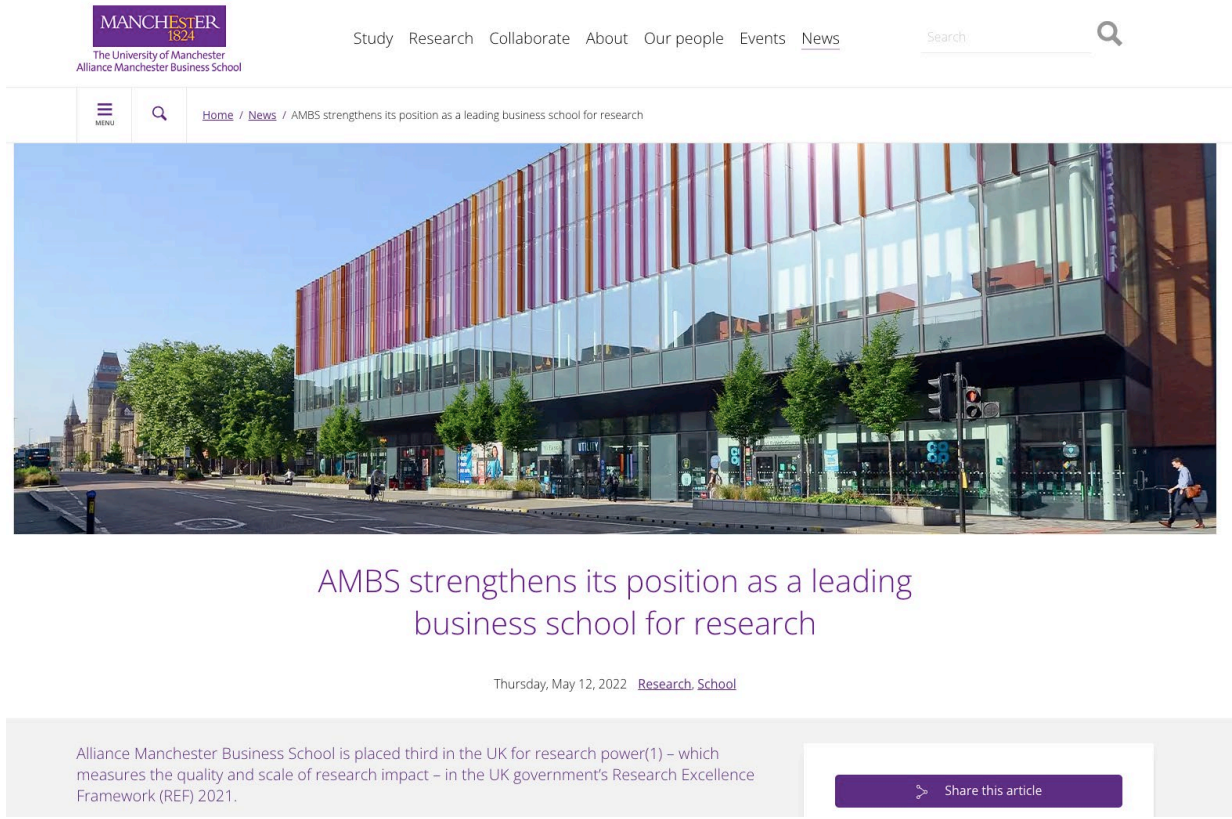
About me

2016-2021, Associate Director for Research Impact and Knowledge Exchange, AMBS

Supervised the submission of ten impact cases for REF2021 and contributed to school environment statement



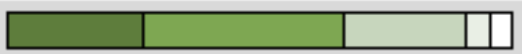
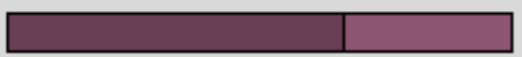
UK REF 2021 Results: University Rankings by Environment Power *

Rank	Institution	No. UoAs	FTE	4*	3*	2*	1*	GPA	Power	GPA* Power
1	University of Oxford	31	3,405	87	12	1	0	3.87	1000	3870
2	UCL	32	3,177	87	12	1	0	3.86	931	3594
3	University of Cambridge	30	2,847	81	18	1	0	3.81	823	3136
4	University of Edinburgh	28	2,563	82	18	0	0	3.82	744	2842
5	University of Manchester	31	2,124	82	18	1	0	3.81	615	2343
6	King's College London	25	1,883	76	22	1	0	3.75	536	2010
7	Imperial College London	11	1,550	94	6	0	0	3.94	464	1828
8	University of Leeds	28	1,686	63	36	1	0	3.62	464	1680
9	University of Nottingham	29	1,718	59	36	4	0	3.55	464	1647
10	University of Bristol	28	1,494	68	31	1	0	3.67	417	1530

* Total universities=129. Power=Research Power, representing institutional scale.

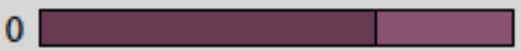
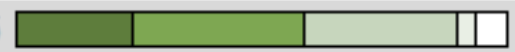
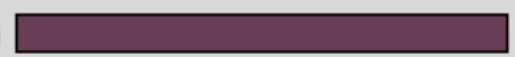
Results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2020

Panel 9 - Business & Economics

Sector-wide / university	Quality profile & sub-profiles	Percentage judged to meet the standard of : 4*	3*	2*	1*	u/c	4* 3* 2* 1* u/c	No. of eligible staff
Sector-wide	**Overall**	**32**	**38**	**19**	**5**	**6**		659
	Outputs	26	37	22	6	9		
	Impact	36	51	9	4	0		
	Environment	55	31	14	0	0		
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	**Overall**	**40**	**37**	**17**	**3**	**3**		103
	Outputs	27	40	24	5	4		
	Impact	75	25	0	0	0		
	Environment	67	33	0	0	0		

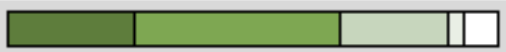
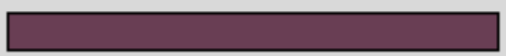
Results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2020

UoA 20 - accountancy

Sector-wide / university	Quality profile & sub-profiles	Percentage judged to meet the standard of : 4*	3*	2*	1*	u/c	4* 3* 2* 1* u/c	No. of eligible staff
Sector-wide	**Overall**	**36**	**37**	**15**	**2**	**10**		105
	Outputs	27	35	21	3	14		
	Impact	40	60	0	0	0		
	Environment	71	29	0	0	0		
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	**Overall**	**47**	**24**	**22**	**3**	**4**		19
	Outputs	24	35	31	4	6		
	Impact	100	0	0	0	0		
	Environment	100	0	0	0	0		

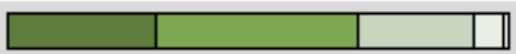
Results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2020

UoA 21 - economics and finance

Sector-wide / university	Quality profile & sub-profiles	Percentage judged to meet the standard of : 4*	3*	2*	1*	u/c	4* 3* 2* 1* u/c	No. of eligible staff
Sector-wide	**Overall**	**28**	**36**	**22**	**5**	**9**		220
	Outputs	23	35	23	6	13		
	Impact	37	47	11	5	0		
	Environment	43	28	29	0	0		
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	**Overall**	**48**	**30**	**15**	**2**	**5**		41
	Outputs	26	42	22	3	7		
	Impact	100	0	0	0	0		
	Environment	100	0	0	0	0		

Results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2020

UoA 22 - business

Sector-wide / university	Quality profile & sub-profiles	Percentage judged to meet the standard of : 4*	3*	2*	1*	u/c		No. of eligible staff
Sector-wide	**Overall**	**31**	**41**	**19**	**6**	**3**		295
	Outputs	29	37	22	7	5		
	Impact	30	53	13	4	0		
	Environment	43	43	14	0	0		
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	**Overall**	**26**	**53**	**16**	**4**	**1**		43
	Outputs	30	40	23	6	1		
	Impact	33	67	0	0	0		
	Environment	0	100	0	0	0		

DEFINITION OF ENVIRONMENT, RAE 2026

For the purpose of the RAE 2026, research environment refers to the strategy, resources (e.g. grants obtained, people) and infrastructure that support research giving rise to collaborations, esteem and contributions to the discipline or research base.

Weighting of RAE elements		
	2020	**2026**
Outputs	70	65
Impact	15	20
Environment	15	15

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

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Word Cloud from UK's top-ranked business school environment statement, REF2021

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

DEFINITION OF ENVIRONMENT

What does the department do that enables its researchers to make significant contributions to the discipline and generate significant impact?

Word Cloud from UK's top-ranked business school environment statement, REF2021

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

REQUIREMENTS OF EO STATEMENTS, RAE 2026

One UoA-level environment overview statement describing:

- The submitting unit's research and impact strategy(ies);
- research integrity, research ethics and research culture;
- its support for research staff and students;
- its research income, infrastructure and facilities;
- its research collaborations, esteem and wider contributions to the discipline or research base, etc.

of the administrative units containing the staff in the submitting UoA during the assessment period, i.e. from 1 October 2019 to 30 September 2025

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

ASSESSMENT CRITERIA: VITALITY AND SUSTAINABILITY

- Panels will assess the research environment in terms of its “vitality and sustainability”, including its contribution to the “vitality and sustainability” of the wider discipline or research base.
- Panels may decide on whether to assess each environment submission as a whole, or to attach weighting to individual aspects within the environment element in their assessment.

Vitality: The extent to which a unit supports a thriving and inclusive research culture for all staff and research students, that is based on a clearly articulated strategy for research and enabling its impact, is engaged with the local and international research and user communities and can attract excellent postgrads and postdocs.

Sustainability: The extent to which the research environment ensures the future health, diversity, wellbeing and wider contribution of the unit and the discipline(s), including investment in people and in infrastructure.

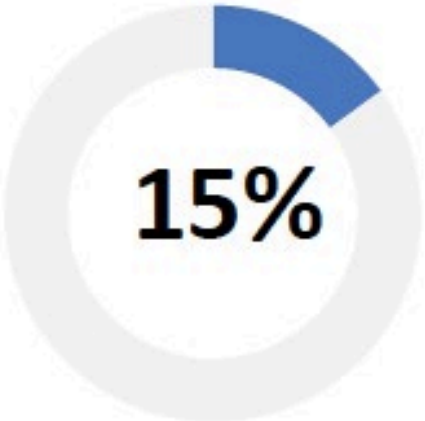
https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

DEFINITIONS OF QUALITY

4 star (4*):	An environment that is conducive to producing research of world-leading quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
3 star (3*):	An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally excellent quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
2 star (2*):	An environment that is conducive to producing research of internationally recognised quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
1 star (1*):	An environment that is conducive to producing research of limited quality, in terms of its vitality and sustainability.
Unclassified (u/c)	An environment that is not conducive to producing research of 1 star quality; or nil submission.

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

Research Environment (EN)



(i) University-level EN overview statement

	No. of pages
3 to 300	6
301 to 600	7
601 to 800	8
801 or more	9

→ Template at Appendix 3(a)

(ii) Unit-of-assessment-level EN overview statement

	No. of pages
3 to 15	6
16 to 30	8
31 to 45	10
46 or more	13

→ Template at Appendix 3(b)

(iii) EN data

→ Template at Appendix 4

https://www.ugc.edu.hk/doc/eng/ugc/rae/2026/framework.pdf

EXERCISE: EVALUATING ENVIRONMENT STATEMENTS

(30 MINUTES, IN BREAKOUT GROUPS)

EVALUATING ENVIRONMENT STATEMENTS

Using the two provided environment statements from the UK's REF2021, in your breakout groups:

Task (30 minutes)

1. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of each statement
2. Decide as a group: Which is 3* and which is 4*?

EVALUATING ENVIRONMENT STATEMENTS

Discussion and conclusions from the exercise:

WHAT MAKES A WORLD-LEADING RESEARCH ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT?

ELEMENTS OF A 4* ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT

- Numerical quality indicators
- Impact & engagement focus
- Narrative
- Disciplinary focus
- Esteem indicators
- Halo effects

QUANTITATIVE INDICATORS OF QUALITY

- Pinar & Unlu (2020) analyzed all EO statements from UK REF2014
- Size (FTE staff), which is a proxy of the level of collaboration, infrastructure, and facilities, is the biggest predictor of GPA
- But 'size effect' disappears when using raw totals for research income and PGRs
- So, focus on the benefits of size (collaborations, facilities, resources) and on the benefits of income (i.e., how it is used to enable contributions to the discipline and enable impact)

Determinants of EO GPA in Business & Management, Ranked

Rank	Determinant
1	FTE staff submitted (0.612***)
2	Panel member in REF (0.272***)
3	Russel group member (0.183*)
4	Income per FTE (0.145***)
5	PGRs per FTE (0.095*)

Pinar, M & Unlu, E. (2020) Determinants of quality of research environment: An assessment of the environment submissions in the UK's Research Excellence Framework in 2014, *Research Evaluation*, 29, 3, 231–244, https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvaa003

HOW (NOT) TO WRITE AN ENVIRONMENT STATEMENT

- Inglis et al (2024) used topic modelling to analyze all 1,888 unit-level environment statements in REF2021
- How the statements were written contributed substantially to the perceived quality of a unit's research environment
- They uncovered eight topics that predicted significant proportion (59%) of variation in environment scores
- The findings support anecdotal ideas concerning how to write a good environment statement

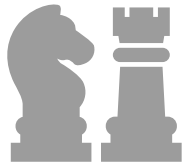
Topic	Beta
Immature Research Environment	−0.438***
Exemplification of Strategy and Processes	0.117***
Early Career Researcher (ECR) Development ◠	−0.112***
Industry Partners and Funding	0.068***
Staff Ways of Working	−0.057***
REF-Focused Research Strategy	−0.054***
Internal Structure of Research Units	−0.006
Career Development and EDI ◠	−0.023

Predictors of environment GPA, by Beta
◠=relationship is curvilinear

Inglis, M., Gadd, E., Stokoe, E. (2024). What is a high-quality research environment? Evidence from the UK's research excellence framework, *Research Evaluation*, https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvae010

POSITIVE PREDICTORS

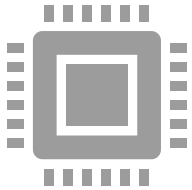
Differs across disciplines, more important in medicine & physical sciences



Exemplification of strategy and processes

Liberal use of explicit examples of the research strategies being described

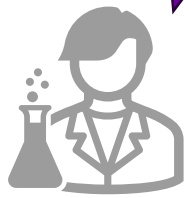
E.g., To evidence civic engagement strategy, “The Pentland Centre for Sustainable Business was launched with an initial £500k five-year grant from The Rubin Foundation ... [and] organises company-based events bringing non-academics ... into dialogue with academics.”



Industry partners & funding

Devoting considerable space to discussing industrial partnerships and research funding

E.g., for their EPSRC Centre for Doctoral Training (STOR-i), LUMS listed >£1M in industry & government funding involving Rolls-Royce, Morgan Stanley, and others.



Discipline-specific issues

Emphasizing contributions to the discipline and using language and issues from the discipline.

E.g., LUMS research strengths for interdisciplinary research centres described in terms of disciplinary grand challenges (economic growth, productivity and innovation, climate change and sustainability, data & digital transformation)

NEGATIVE PREDICTORS

Immature research environment

Lower scoring units discussed extensively how they were trying to encourage or support routine research activities

E.g., Low scoring units stating that staff are encouraged to attend conferences and are allocated dedicated research time; high scoring units take this for granted.

ECR development & EDI

Support and training for early career researchers and steps to address equality, diversity and inclusion in research.

A little discussion helps (top units=13-14% of the statement) but too much emphasis was associated with low GPA.

Staff ways of working

Text focusses heavily on descriptions of staff working methods,

E.g., Detailed discussions of research leave, workloads, etc.

REF focused research strategy

Using REF terminology to describe the research environment.

E.g., describing internal structures in terms of UoAs or ‘units’ rather than departments, centres or institutes.

DIFFERENCES BETWEEN DISCIPLINES

Predictors of environment GPA, by Beta

All units of assessment

Topic	Beta
Immature Research Environment	−0.438***
Exemplification of Strategy and Processes	0.117***
Early Career Researcher (ECR) Development	−0.112***
Industry Partners and Funding	0.068***
Staff Ways of Working	−0.057***
REF-Focused Research Strategy	−0.054***
Internal Structure of Research Units	−0.006
Career Development and EDI	−0.023

Business & Management

Topic	Beta
Immature Research Environment	−0.496***
Industry Partners and Funding	0.336***
Early Career Researcher (ECR) Development	−0.219***
Business & Management	0.120***
Exemplification of Strategy and Process	0.102
REF-Focused Research Strategy	−0.083
Internal Structure of Research Units	0.013
Staff Ways of Working	0.073
Career Development and EDI	0.010

Inglis, M., Gadd, E., Stokoe, E. (2024). What is a high-quality research environment? Evidence from the UK's research excellence framework, *Research Evaluation*, https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvae010

NARRATIVE

Higher scoring units tend to have an over-arching narrative that is:

Distinctive

Not merely describing the norm for departments in the discipline but emphasizing the distinguishing features that have enabled influences on the discipline and practice.

Authentic

Credible and true to the department's/school's history and known achievements

Mission-led

The mission is usually linked to research contributions to the discipline and/or impact and engagement priorities.

E.g.,

Cardiff Business School's strategy of Public Value
Imperial College Business School's focus on interdisciplinarity
Alliance Manchester Business School's sense of place

CONCLUSIONS AND PRACTICAL TIPS

CONCLUSIONS

- The environment statement is 15% of the assessment and is controllable
  - You cannot (now) control outputs and impact but you can craft the statement
  - The language and narrative you choose will shape your school's score
- The differences between 3* and 4* statements are obvious
  - And so, you can observe them and learn the 'rules'
  - Read and contrast (further) example statements from lower and higher scoring units
- Crafting the statement is a creative act but probably not a solo one
  - Writing a good statement takes many drafts and will involve several people
  - But, like any good piece of writing, the final version must speak with one voice
  - Avoid the two dangers of buck-passing and writing by committee

MAIN PRACTICAL TIPS

1. Develop a distinctive, authentic, mission-led narrative
2. Describe contributions to the discipline as much as possible and work back to describe the strategy, resources and infrastructure that enabled these
   - Write the statement outside-in, not inside-out
3. Illustrate your research strategy by giving as many concrete examples as possible
   - Interdisciplinary work? Give specific examples of interdisciplinary contributions, funding successes, or impact work.
   - Impact focus? Give examples of beneficiaries and how they benefited (link to impact cases) and what support enabled this activity.
   - Pump-priming? Give examples of people who received funding, what they did with it, and what this led to.
4. Describe research funding and industry/practice/policy partnerships as much as possible
   - Use detail to go beyond numbers in grant data to show how income was used
   - Describe industry and practice collaborations

RESOURCES

- Guidance notes on the exercise
  - https://www.ugc.edu.hk/eng/ugc/activity/research/rae/2026/guidance_notes.html
- Example statements
  - https://2021.ref.ac.uk/ (REF2021, 1,888 impact cases)
- Further reading on what makes a good environment statement
  - Pinar, M & Unlu, E. (2020) Determinants of quality of research environment: An assessment of the environment submissions in the UK's Research Excellence Framework in 2014, *Research Evaluation*, 29, 3, 231–244, https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvaa003
  - Inglis, M., Gadd, E., Stokoe, E. (2024). What is a high-quality research environment? Evidence from the UK's research excellence framework, *Research Evaluation*, https://doi.org/10.1093/reseval/rvae010
  - Blackburn, R., Dibb, S., & Tonks, I. (2024). Business and management studies in the United Kingdom's 2021 research excellence framework: Implications for research quality assessment. *British Journal of Management*, *35*(1), 434-448, https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8551.12721

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THANK YOU!

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