

Expanded REF2029 Outputs Criteria Guide – Law

updated October 2025

This document aims to provide useful information to colleagues when identifying (and ranking) their own publications as potential REF submissions. It includes, in Sections 1 and 2, the criteria which the REF Outputs Review panel will apply in assessing such publications. Those criteria are drawn from: (i) the general criteria/guidance from REF 2021; and (ii) the detailed supplementary criteria applied by the Law sub-panel in REF 2021. Section 3 sets out some indicia, developed from discussions in the Outputs Review panel, which may be helpful in applying those REF2021 criteria.

1. General Criteria/Guidance from REF2021

Starred Level	Definition of Quality	Expanded Scale Score	Expanded Scale Meaning
4*	World-leading in terms of originality, significance and rigour	12	Upper 4*
		11	Mid 4*
		10	Lower 4*
3*	Internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour but which falls short of the highest standards of excellence	9	Upper 3*
		8	Mid 3*
		7	Lower 3*
2*	Internationally recognized in terms of originality, significance and rigour	6	Upper 2*
		5	Mid 2*
		4	Lower 2*
1*	Nationally recognised in terms of originality, significance and rigour	3	Upper 1*
		2	Mid 1*
		1	Lower 1*
Unclassified	Falls below the standard of nationally recognized work, or work that does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment	0	unclassified

Originality – Will be understood as the extent to which the output makes an important and innovative contribution to understanding and knowledge in the field. Research outputs that demonstrate originality may do one or more of the following: produce and interpret new empirical findings or new material; engage with new and/or complex problems; develop innovative research methods, methodologies and analytical techniques; show imaginative and creative scope; provide new arguments and/or new forms of expression, formal innovations,

interpretations and/or insights; collect and engage with novel types of data; and/or advance theory or the analysis of doctrine, policy or practice, and new forms of expression.

Significance – Will be understood as the extent to which the work has influenced, or has the capacity to influence, knowledge and scholarly thought, or the development and understanding of policy and/or practice

Rigour – Will be understood as the extent to which the work demonstrates intellectual coherence and integrity, and adopts robust and appropriate concepts, analyses, sources, theories and/or methodologies

2. Detailed supplementary criteria applied by Main Panel C (including Law) in REF2021

In relation to each of the * levels, reviewers will expect to see some of the following characteristics:

4*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Outstandingly novel in developing concepts, paradigms, techniques or outcomes- A primary or essential point of reference- A formative influence on the intellectual agenda- Application of exceptionally rigorous research design and techniques of investigation and analysis- Generation of an exceptionally significant data set or research resource.
3*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Novel in developing concepts, paradigms, techniques or outcomes- An important point of reference- Contributing very important knowledge, ideas and techniques which are likely to have a lasting influence on the intellectual agenda- Application of robust and appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis- Generation of a substantial data set or research resource.
2*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Providing important knowledge and the application of such knowledge- Contributing to incremental and cumulative advances in knowledge- Thorough and professional application of appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis.
1*	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Providing useful knowledge, but unlikely to have more than a minor influence- An identifiable contribution to understanding, but largely framed by existing paradigms or traditions of enquiry- Competent application of appropriate research design and techniques of investigation and analysis.

3. Indicia that may be useful in applying the criteria

It should be emphasised that the aim of the indicia below is simply to assist in the specific task of identifying publications which are most likely to be awarded 4* or 3* according to the criteria set out in Sections 1 and 2 above. The indicia are not a substitute for those criteria and so, for example, the presence of one or more of the qualities, identified below, which increase the chances of an output being awarded 4*, is not a sufficient condition of that output being graded at 4* by the Outputs Review Panel.

Qualities which increase the chances of an output being awarded 4*:

- Clearly situating the contribution of the piece within the existing literature
- Rigour in considering counter-arguments
- Success in drawing on wider literature to make points in a specific area; or conversely success in extrapolating from detailed analysis of specific area to make points of wider relevance
- Clarity in setting out a specific path forward in relation to the issue discussed
- Clarity in pointing out weaknesses of commonly made and influential arguments
- Providing new perspectives by looking across different areas of law/ different legal systems
- Rigour in carefully developing argument from stage to stage
- Success in transposing ideas/analysis from one field to another seemingly quite different field
- Establishing new analytical framework/ making convincing distinctions allowing for improved consideration of particular issues
- Successfully tackling a set of issues not previously examined in the academic literature

An output can be ranked 2* where it provides important knowledge; contributes to incremental advances in knowledge; and is thorough and professional in its analysis. This means that a 2* rating does *not* mean that an output is inherently weak; nor does it mean it of a standard which would make it unlikely ever to be accepted for publication in a leading journal. There can be many outputs which are useful contributions (for example in setting out, not least for the benefit of students and practitioners, clearly existing analyses and the differences between them) and so worthy of publication in a peer-reviewed journal, but are nonetheless unlikely to be awarded 3* or 4* when the REF criteria are applied.

The 3*/4* borderline: 4* work is an essential or primary point of reference in the field. Even if later authors disagree with the piece, they will need to engage with it. It will often open up new paths for inquiry, e.g. by showing a link between two previously separate areas or ideas. A 4* output is ambitious and its significance is clearly signalled in the piece itself. Rigour is of course essential and any potential reservations or limits should be recognised and discussed rather than ignored. 4* work is very clearly expressed and well-written.

The 3*/2* borderline: 3* work does more than simply contribute to incremental advances in knowledge. It provides an important point of reference and thus develops the field other than by simply applying existing ideas to new material. Framing can be crucial: if a piece discusses a specific or seemingly narrow point, it may still be 3* if it shows the broader significance of the piece and its conclusions.

It should also be noted that overlap with other publications, *including with publications of the same author*, is a significant factor when considering the originality and significance of an output. Attention should therefore be given, when proposing publications as potential REF submissions, to such overlap.

4. Editorial contributions

The REF criteria do not distinguish between types or places of publication and it was emphasised throughout the work of the REF 2021 Law sub-panel that each output should be assessed on its own merits, with no weight placed on the type of publication (journal article/ chapter in book, etc) or the place of publication. It is of course often the case that a publication will benefit from having been through a rigorous peer-review process, but there is no inherent advantage to journal articles over other forms of publication and it is certainly possible for (e.g.) a chapter in an edited collection to be 4*.

Where an author has not only written or co-written a chapter in an edited collection, but has also edited or co-edited the book itself, it is likely to be possible (as it was in REF 2021) to submit the whole book itself, allowing the Law sub-panel then to assess not only the author's chapter, but also the author's editorial contribution to the book as a whole. It is possible in theory for this editorial contribution, in combination with the editor's contribution as an author, to assist the output in meeting the criteria for a 4* output. However, it is likely that this will only be the case where there is a very clear research statement; a very strong introduction setting out the contribution of the editorial work to the originality, significance and rigour of the collection; and high levels of originality, significance and rigour in the editor's contribution as an author of a chapter. This may be possible, for example, where the editorial contribution consists of formulating a particular design for a collaborative project, or of bringing together ideas in a new way to have a formative influence on the intellectual agenda, or of generating an exceptionally significant research resource. Equally, there will be many cases where the editorial contribution, whilst valuable in providing important knowledge by presenting a set of individually helpful contributions, does not have such effects, and so is unlikely to be seen as sufficient to justify assessing the book as a whole as higher than 2*.

As a result, **if an editor wishes to nominate an edited collection** as a whole book, rather than simply nominating their author/co-authored chapter or introduction, they should also **provide a short statement on the nomination form (no more than a paragraph) setting out the originality, significance, and rigour of their editorial contribution to the book.**

Even if you are not planning to nominate the whole of an edited collection, please do upload it to Symplectic. It will be important for us to know about such collections when writing those parts of the REF 2029 submission focussing on People, Culture, and Environment: bringing people together to produce such collections is one important way in which we help to maintain a vibrant research community in Oxford and beyond.

5. Criteria for double-weighting

We can request that a particular output be ‘double-weighted’ (i.e. count as 2 of the total number of outputs which a particular institution must submit). The relevant sub-panel then decides if this request is allowed. The guidance for REF 2021 Main Panel C was that double-weighting requests should be allowed where ‘the scale of academic investment in the research activity and/or the intellectual scope of the research output is considerable’

Qualities which increase the chances of double-weighting:

- Argument sustained over book-length
- Collection of data over sustained period
- Analysis of material from wide range of sources/ jurisdictions

Qualities which decrease the chances of double-weighting:

- Lack of clear links between parts of submitted book
- Use of pre-existing material (e.g. past articles) to produce book

6. Past Output performance in Law: for information

Overall scores	% 4*	% 3*	% 2*	% 1*
National 2021	35	39	23	2
National 2014	20	47	29	4
Oxford 2021	36	36	24	4
Oxford 2014	38	41	17	2

Types of output	% Journal articles	% Books	% Book chapters
National 2021	58	23	16
Oxford 2021	60	14	25

Note that the increase in the % of 4* outputs on the national level as between 2014 and 2021 reflects the changed submission requirements, with an increased flexibility as to how many outputs each staff member needed to submit. Those requirements will be made still more flexible in REF2029, so the expectation is that the national % of 4* outputs will continue to increase.