



University of Exeter

COUNCIL

MINUTES AND ACTIONS – APPROVED BY COUNCIL

29 April 2026

10.30am-12.00pm

Exploration Lab 2, The Forum, Streatham Campus

NB text in BLACK for publication; text in BLUE has been redacted for publication

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Council Meeting

No: Item:

25.87 Chair's Welcome, Introduction and Declarations of Interest

25.88 REF 2029 Progress Update

25.89 Digital, Data and AI Strategy Update

25.90 Strategic Update on Project Tardis

25.91 Chair's Closing Remarks

Attendees:

MEMBERS PRESENT

Quentin Woodley (Chair)	Pro-Chancellor and Chair of Council
Professor Lisa Roberts	President and Vice-Chancellor
Professor Dan Charman	Senior Vice-President and Provost
Professor Liz Jones	Vice-President and Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Education and Student Experience)
Professor Malcolm Skingle	Pro-Chancellor and Deputy Chair of Council
Sally Cabrini	Pro-Chancellor and Senior Independent Governor
Lauren Aste	Independent Member
Rebecca Boomer-Clark	Independent Member
Nigel Cain	Independent Member
Adrian Harris	Independent Member
Karime Hassan	Independent Member
Gareth Mostyn	Independent Member
Sarah Matthews-DeMers	Independent Member
Tim Weller	Independent Member
Glenn Woodcock	Independent Member
Dr Sarah Hodge	Senate Representative
Professor Maisha Reza	Senate Representative
Professor Karen Knapp	Senate Representative
Elaine Cordy	Professional Services Representative

88.2 REF 2029 would assess the excellence of research activity in HEIs across three assessment areas:

88.2.1 contribution to knowledge and understanding (55%);

88.2.2 engagement and impact (25%);

88.2.3 and strategy, people and research environment (20%).

88.3 The REF assessment process consisted of academic panels for 34 discipline-based Units of Assessment, with the University expected to submit to 26 of these Units of Assessment. A volume measure (FTE) of our employment contracts with “significant responsibility for research” was also assessed;

88.4 The University’s ambitions for REF 2029 was to increase 4* activity and eliminate 2%* activity across the REF areas of assessment.

88.5 In relation to REF progress preparation milestones:

88.5.1 The University had aimed to ensure the research outputs pool for the contribution to knowledge and understanding assessment area was over 3,500 in 2024/25. Approximately 4,000 outputs had already been identified it was estimated that 33% of these outputs would be rated 4* (world-leading) and 56% rated 3* (internationally excellent). A further outputs review would be progressed in 2025/26, but based on the current institutional position it was expected that the University would be able to continue to increase the number of 4* papers and exceed the target of 50% 4* papers and 50% 3* papers;

88.5.2 The University had also identified a list of c. 151 potential impact case studies to showcase and it was estimated that 107 impact case studies would be required based on the current value measure linked to FTE. 53 Impact Case studies had been prioritised for drafting in 2025/26 and were currently under review. There would be greater information surrounding the emerging quality of impact case studies in the few weeks. Whilst the levels of maturation in the development of impact case studies currently varies, there was clear potential for the case studies identified to score 4*;

88.5.3 In relation to Strategy, People & Research Environment (SPRE) the Units of Assessment and institutional level narrative statements had been drafted;

88.5.4 Council commended the strategic approach being adopted to REF 2029 and were encouraged by the progress that had already been made in advance of submission in autumn 2028;

88.5.6 In relation to the process for accurately assessing and validating the quality of research:

88.5.6.1 In order to assess the quality of research across the range of different areas, the University drew on the expertise and experiences of internal staff who had previously served on REF panels in 2014 and 2021 and staff currently involved sitting on research panels in 2028. Lessons learned and Individual insights were also drawn upon from staff who had previously successfully written 4* impact case studies and research outputs to consider how to produce world-leading research in alignment with REF criteria of originality, significance and rigour.

88.5.6.2 The quality of research outputs was also carefully calibrated through external expert input, with a particular focus on research on the borderline of 2-3* and 3-4*.

88.5.7 In relation to the strategic approach to REF and potential advantages posed by the alignment with Strategy 2030:

88.5.7.1 The strategic approach to REF 2029 was to focus on producing high-quality research and to ensure that following the completion of the research review and calibration process the University selected the best research for submission and maintained sufficient strength across the various Units of Assessment;

88.5.7.2 The focus in Strategy 2030 on developing a dynamic and innovative research culture which fostered research excellence was aligned with achieving strong performance in REF 2029. The focus on interdisciplinarity within Strategy 2030 would also present greater opportunities to strategically select which research was presented for specific Units of Assessment, especially as there was more the ability to submit research to more than one Unit of Assessment and greater flexibility surrounding individual outputs in REF 2029 (with institutions able to select up to 5 outputs per person and no minimum requirement for all research-active staff to be submitted);

88.5.7.3 Ian Chapman (Chief Executive of UK Research and Innovation) had recently indicated in discussions with Russell Group institutions that notwithstanding the increasing government emphasis on institutions being increasingly focused on their specialist areas of research strengths, there was still an expectation of research-intensive institutions having broad-based research excellence across different areas in REF 2029;

88.5.8. In relation to planned enhancements in institutional performance between REF 2021 and REF 2029;

88.5.8.1 It was noted that the change of rules in REF2029 was likely to lead to an increase in the proportion of 3* and 4* publications submitted across all HEIs. Whilst it was expected that other institutions would also have an institutional focus on improving their performance in REF 2029 it was difficult to ascertain to what extent other institutions would be successful in achieving this.

88.5.8.2 The institutional focus was therefore on making sure that all of the best research outputs and impact case studies across the University were identified for submission and that institutional narratives were as well-developed as possible;

88.5.8.3 It was recognised that in REF 2021, the University had performed well in research outputs. In relation to Impact Case Studies in particular it was noted that the University had performed exceptionally well and that realistically it would be hard to outperform the previous performance in REF 2021. There would nevertheless be opportunities to utilise previous impact case studies submitted in REF 2021 providing there was new research and further impact associated with this;

88.5.8.4 In relation to Strategy, People and Research Environment, it was recognised that 'Environment' was a lagging indicator for Exeter in REF 2021, but that this as partly attributable to the lack of capital investment in relation to other peer institutions and that it would be challenging to compete with other Russell Group institutions that had made substantial investment in research infrastructure. There were nevertheless opportunities to enhance narrative statements (at both an institutional and discipline level) which could

potentially improve performance in this area and to provide a more compelling articulation of the enhancements in relation to research culture which was more prominent than in REF 2021;

88.5.8.5 It was recognised that whereas there had been significant staff growth between 2014 and 2021 which had been showcased in the REF 2021 submission, the University would not be able to demonstrate this same trajectory of growth and research power across the institution in REF 2029. However, it was noted that this was a collective concern across sector in the current challenging financial landscape and that other institutions would be in a similar position. It was also highlighted that there had continued to be staff growth in strategic areas of focus aligned with Strategy 2030 ambitions;

88.5.9 In relation to the financial implications of the current assessment REF 2029 performance:

88.5.9.1 It was highlighted that the specific research funding formula being utilised for REF 2029 would not be known until after the REF results had been published and so it was not possible to align the current institutional approach to a specific formula that would maximise the University's financial return;

88.5.9.2 That it was noted that REF 2029 submissions would not be made until autumn 2028 and there was a lagging time frame for the associated QR funding which would not be received until 2030/2031, so there would be no immediate financial implications as a result of performance in REF 2029;

88.5.10 The following was noted in discussion:

88.5.10.1 REF 2029 performance was focused on a holistic approach to assessment of research excellence, focusing on the overall impact and contribution of institutions across discipline-based units of assessment. There was no direct alignment with government priorities or the UK Industrial Strategy;

88.5.10.2 Whilst performance in REF 2029 did not directly impact the level of externally awarded funding received, strong REF performance helped to cultivate a strong institutional research reputation which could inform decisions of external funding bodies;

AGREED: To schedule a further progress update on REF 2029 in the Academic Year 2026-27.

89. Digital, Data and AI Strategy Update (CNL/126/25-26 Strictly Confidential)

The Senior Vice-President and Provost and the Senior Vice-President and Registrar & Secretary delivered a presentation on Digital, Data and AI Strategy.

89.1 The Digital Strategy, Data Strategy and Enabling AI Strategy's had been developed to enable clearer integration of activity across Digital, Data and AI and to ensure this directly aligned with delivery of Strategy 2030;

89.2 A new streamlined governance model had been developed to focus leadership attention on strategic transformation outcomes and to delegate detail to the right levels. The Digital Transformation, Data & AI Strategy Board would help set institutional priorities and focus on major transformation outcomes across education, research and operations;

89.3 The AI@Exeter Group (Academic Advisory Group) provided academic and innovation leadership

for AI, data and digital across the University and brought together expertise and activity from across Faculties;

89.4 The Foundations were in place for all students to enable them to engage with AI and the University was providing opportunities for students to choose to explore and innovate across a range of activities, including: Digital Skills mapped to curriculum for all students through the Skills to Thrive framework and opportunity to develop AI specialism through Applied AI Future Skills Pathway. There was also a focus on raising awareness of AI resources available to all students, including updated guidance on use of AI Assessments;

89.5 In UK Higher Education, AI use was widespread across the student body and accelerating, with national surveys indicating that the vast majority of UK students now use AI tools to support core academic activity, with academic and professional services staff also increasingly using AI for their work also. The University of Surrey had recently announced that AI would be embedded in discipline-specific ways in every degree from September 2026 to train students in both the power and limitations of AI;

89.6 In relation to further AI investment:

89.6.1 There was a critical strategic decision point in May when SIC and UEB would consider further AI investment to build on the Digital, Data and AI foundations to further support AI utilisation through equitable, secure and institutionally approved platforms aligned to Exeter's values, policy and risk appetite;

Closed Minute – Strictly Confidential

ENDORSED: The strategic direction of travel to invest further in AI to enable Exeter to position itself as a sector-leading institution in digital, data and AI over the coming year and beyond.

ACTION: To schedule a further strategic update on AI at Council in the Academic Year 2026-27.

90. Strategic Update on Project Tardis (CNL/127/25-26 Confidential)

90.1 Following the implementation of Project Tardis in October 2025 the University had established how to assess demand for learning environments, pinpoint specific space requirements to effectively and efficiently deliver teaching, and identify opportunities to reconfigure the existing estate within a reduced financial and carbon envelope to ensure the University remained well-prepared to respond to change and minimize issues impacting NSS experience.

90.2 The most significant demand driver was on formal learning spaces and timetabled contact time. Project Tardis was in place to support the University to deliver increases in number of FTE students, which reach a total peak in 2028/29. The previous peak during Covid-19 had been challenging, in spite of the fact some delivery was kept online in line with government policy and restrictions;

90.3 The University operated the leanest estate in the UK and was currently operating at 1m² of Learning Space per FTE versus the Peer Group of 1.8-1.9m² per FTE. It was noted that Oxbridge were closer to 4/5m² per FTE. Operating at this current frequency presented constraints on the scope to respond and reschedule instances where students are unable to respond due to clashes, or where learning environments were closed or a member of staff was sick;

90.4 The analysis of the utilisation of general teaching spaces indicated that from 2026-27 there would be a need to adopt a 'best fit' approach to timetabling through splitting cohorts larger than 250;

Closed Minute – Strictly Confidential

90.7 In relation to specialist teaching spaces, further work was being undertaken to explore delivering some modules in a simple 'flex lab' avoiding the need to build expensive new wet lab space. A flexible 60-person 'flex lab' at St Luke's campus would be enabled through conversion of office space and was being progressed through early feasibility and concept design phases;

90.8 Further modelling was underway to incorporate how C4C (including curriculum review, outcomes, minors and future academic year cadence) would change the demand profile over time.

91. Chair's Closing Remarks

91.1 The Chair of Council thanked members for their contribution to the strategic briefing session and noted that following lunch in Reed Hall the Joint Senate and Council meeting would reconvene in Holland Hall.