

World Rugby Women's Age-Grade Performance Pathway

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Executive Summary and Consensus

Background

In May 2025, Union CEOs agreed a set of workstreams to underpin the financial sustainability of the women's game and to ensure its continued growth and long-term stability. One of those workstreams was to develop a consensus around the age-grade pathway that best suits the women's game, allowing unions to invest in pathway development that is consistent globally. This report series is the product of that workstream.

The Consensus

The representative age grades for women's rugby should be Under 18 and Under 21.

The establishment of this pathway should broaden the talent pool and foster an environment that is developmentally appropriate for girls and encourages them to stay in the game. A global age-grade pathway should support player retention by making the route visible and clear, raise the standard of delivery, and build robust, well-prepared players through consistent developmental exposure. Ultimately, the system should support athletes' growth toward senior international level while removing the U18 cliff-edge that currently contributes to participation drop-out.

	Under 18	Under 21
Purpose	Retention and development of talented players through meaningful experiences and the provision of a clear pathway.	Developing players to thrive in the senior international game and maximise their potential.
Competition	Focus on domestic and/or cross-border competition, at the union's discretion.	Regional focus, with a long-term aim of international competition opportunities.
Best Practice	Build the right daily training environment and offer flexible, developmentally appropriate competition that supports talent retention and long-term growth. This phase should provide an environment that encourages social connection and fun, with personalised, structured progression in a female-centred, safe setting - and strong capability and support around the athlete.	Build the right high-performance environment, and define and protect meaningful playing time for all developing athletes. Offer structured, individualised progression underpinned by player-centred, female-specific standards, with progressive exposure to competition environments - and build capacity around the player so she is fully supported.

Across both stages, the system must be fully connected. Each stage aligned with and reinforcing the others, and designed for long-term sustainability and effectiveness.

The Process: A Consensus Development Conference

The project followed a consensus development conference (CDC) framework. A CDC brings a panel of experts and stakeholders together to evaluate the available scientific evidence and reach a consensus, producing a written statement to guide World Rugby in adapting its high-performance pathway for the women's game. The process is designed to clarify the safety, efficacy, cost and wider implications of the pathway, and to support knowledge dissemination, appropriate use and policy making.

Crucially, a CDC does not start with opinions, it starts with evidence. Each phase of this project built on the one before it, moving from the published research, to the global landscape, to the voices of the people running the pathways, and finally to expert deliberation and endorsement.

Phase	Process
1	A comprehensive review of the published research on age-grade pathways, focused on what is known about female athlete development. 54 international studies, reviews and pathway frameworks were examined. Further detail in <i>Section 1: Evidence Review</i> .
2	A survey of women's high performance managers in 18 unions, mapping the landscape of their domestic, age-grade representative and senior women's pathways, and the barriers and facilitators a global age-grade pathway would present. Further detail in <i>Section 2: Union Survey Report</i> .
3	Interviews with seven unions (four Six Nations and three non-Six Nations) exploring how they view the current global age-grade game, their ideal pathway, and the importance of global alignment. Additional interviews were conducted with age-grade coaches, sports medicine doctors, and international cricket's governing body, whose women's U19 World Cup offers a directly relevant cross-sport case study. Further information in <i>Section 3: Stakeholder Interviews Report</i> .
4	Findings from all three phases were shared with an expert panel of individuals with deep experience of the women's game and age-grade pathways, in rugby and other sports. The findings were presented to the panel on 20 February 2026, where consensus was reached on the structure of the women's age-grade pathway.
5	The consensus was presented for review at a workshop on 23 February 2026 with leaders from the women's game and high-performance domains.
6	The consensus was presented to the Community and Women's High Performance Committees for endorsement on 25 February 2026.

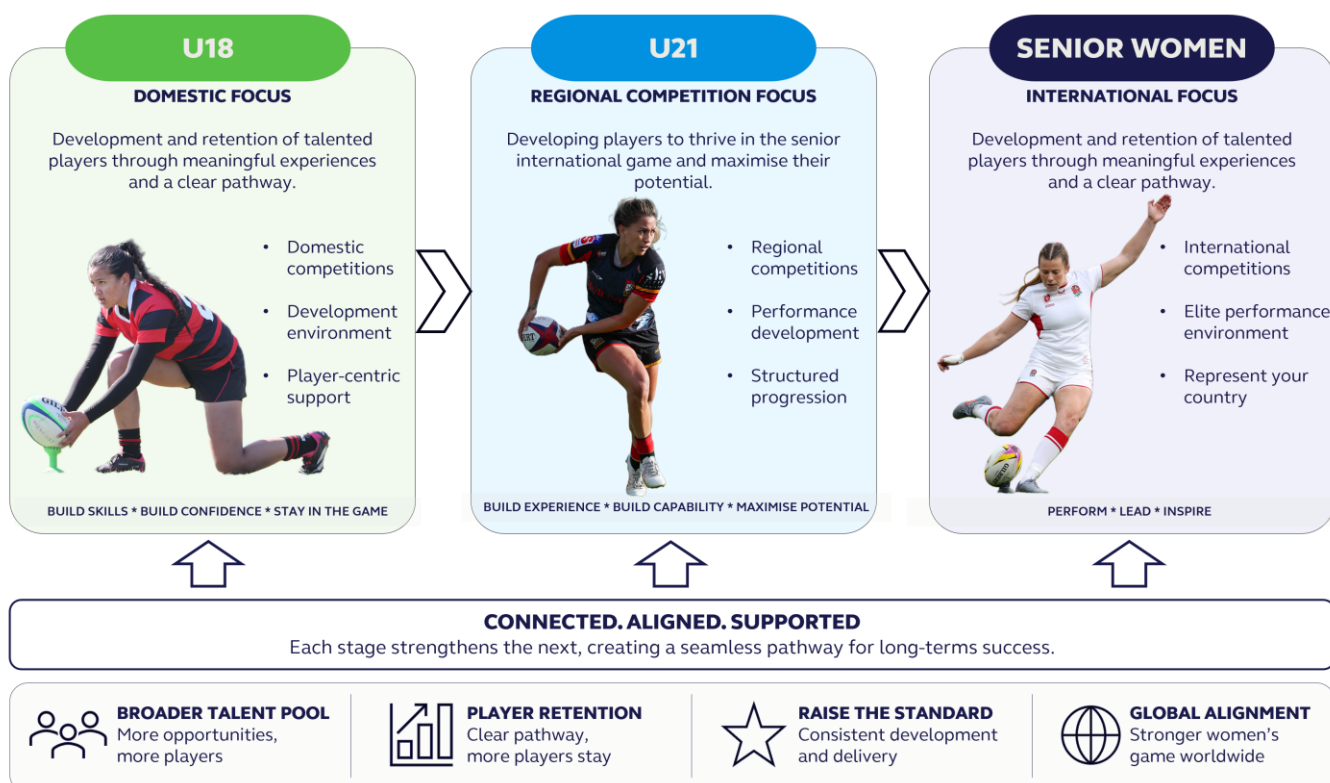
Next Steps

World Rugby will develop a best practice toolkit for age-grade pathways to support unions in implementing this consensus. World Rugby's High Performance team will continue to work directly with unions to develop their age-grade pathways and opportunities.

Overview

WORLD RUGBY WOMEN'S AGE-GRADE PERFORMANCE PATHWAY

A clear and connected pathway that develops players, builds experience and prepares them to compete on the world stage



SECTION 1: EVIDENCE REVIEW



Process

The Literature Review synthesises 54 international research studies, reviews and pathway frameworks on how female athletes develop, to inform the design of a World Rugby women's age-grade pathway. It separates what the evidence establishes from where expert judgement is still required.

What The Evidence Shows

- **Female development is different.** Girls mature earlier than boys, face different injury risks (including ACL rates commonly cited at 2–6 times higher), experience a mid-adolescent performance plateau rather than a pubertal surge, and develop within different structures and constraints - yet roughly 90% of talent development research has not been conducted on female athletes.
- **Early selection and early specialisation do not predict senior success.** The strongest meta-analytic evidence shows the participation patterns that predict junior success are the opposite of those that predict senior world-class performance, and early specialisation roughly doubles injury prevalence in girls
- **Development is non-linear.** Late entry, re-entry, plateaus and delayed acceleration are common features of successful female careers; one-off trials systematically misjudge potential.
- **Age-grade success does not equal senior potential.** Only around one in five top-ranked youth athletes remain top-ranked as seniors; world-class athletes typically peak at 25–27.
- **Environment is more important than early advantage.** Coaching quality, environment and support systems outweigh early physical advantages.

What The Evidence Does Not Support

Rigid, linear pipelines modelled on male rugby pathways; early deselection based on physical maturity or short-term match performance; and narrow, high-load age-grade programmes with limited entry points. The research suggests maintaining a male-derived model carries performance, health, system, equity and reputational risks.

Confidence In The Evidence

- **High-confidence findings:** early selection does not predict senior success; development is non-linear; injury and health risk peaks during adolescence and is amplified by early specialisation.
- **Moderate confidence:** the optimal timing of specialisation by context, and best models for maturity-informed grouping in a collision sport.
- **Requiring expert consensus:** age thresholds for hard selection decisions, minimum mandated health protections, and the balance between global principles and local flexibility.

Recommendations

1. **Design female-first.** Build from female-specific evidence and needs rather than adapting male templates.
2. **Delay formal selection and keep it provisional.** Push representative selection to mid-adolescence or later, use repeated multidimensional assessment, delay deselection, and judge programmes on senior conversion.
3. **Engineer permeability.** Multiple entry, re-entry and exit points, including formal late-entry and talent-transfer routes with transfer-literate coaching.
4. **Promote sampling and manage early load.** Encourage multi-sport participation to roughly age 16; discourage year-round single-sport training before then; monitor combined loads.
5. **Monitor and correct selection bias from day one.** Track birth-quartile and maturation data in every squad from the first intake, while the window remains open.
6. **Assess maturation with female-appropriate methods.** Avoid tools validated only in boys; consider maturity-informed groupings where physical mismatch creates performance or safety risk.
7. **Structure the junior-to-senior transition as a supported, multi-year phase.** Graded senior exposure, psychological support and deliberate integration, measured on performance and wellbeing.
8. **Make dual-career support a core pathway function.** Formalise education and employment flexibility, given the semi-professional economics of most of the women's game.
9. **Embed female athlete health from entry.** Menstrual health education and monitoring, REDs screening, ACL-prevention neuromuscular training, and standardised injury surveillance in every programme.

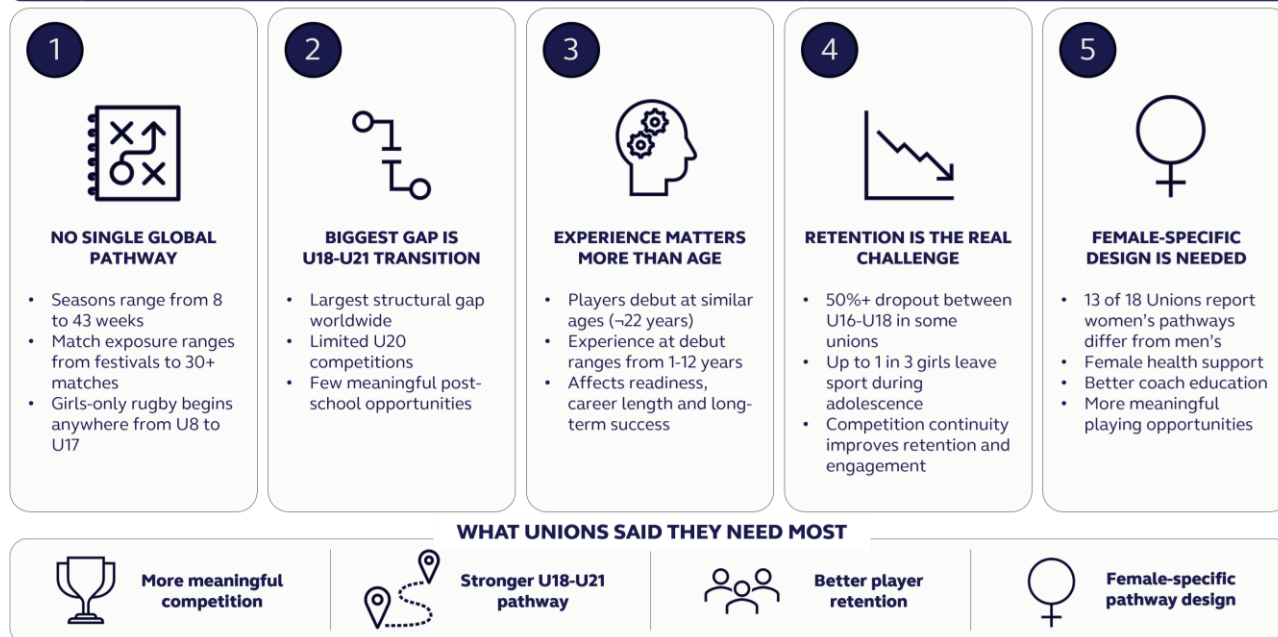
10. **Invest in environment quality and coherence.** Coach education, holistic preparation, alignment among athletes, parents and coaches; periodic environment audits; women in design and governance.
11. **Build the pathway as an evidence engine.** Prospective, longitudinal tracking of who progresses, who leaves and why; union benchmarking through a pillar-based audit adapted to context.

Key Summary: The failure modes of conventional talent systems are now well documented, and the women's game is still young enough to avoid them. The evidence favours a pathway that selects late and provisionally, stays open to late entrants, protects adolescent health, scaffolds the transition to senior rugby alongside education, and measures itself on senior outcomes and athlete wellbeing - not age-grade results.

SECTION 2: UNION SURVEY REPORT



Strategic Direction: The evidence strongly supports a women's-specific, flexible, multi-entry age-grade system that prioritises long-term development, health and retention over early performance outcomes.



Process

World Rugby surveyed 18 national unions across all regions of the women's game on their domestic pathways, representative pathways, senior international transitions, and the barriers and success factors shaping girls' and women's rugby. Findings are fully anonymised, reported by system maturity tier (Established, Developing, Emerging) or as aggregates, and are cross-referenced against the research evidence in Section 1.

Headline Results

- **There is no consistent global structure.** Season length varies from 8 to 43 weeks, annual match exposure from festival-only to 30+ games, and girls-only rugby starts anywhere from U8 to U17. Dual-year age banding is the global norm; participation density, not physiology, drives structure.
- **Entry age is the one point of global agreement.** Formal talent identification most commonly begins at U15–U16, but only around 4–5 unions sustain year-round development from that age; most rely on episodic camps.
- **The U18-to-senior transition is the most fragile stage in every tier;** the largest structural gap globally, and the stage unions themselves identify as most vulnerable.
- **Debut age is uniform (~22) but preparation is not.** Rugby experience at senior international debut ranges from 1 to 12 years. Experience accumulation before debut - not age - is what separates strong systems from fragile ones, and it drives career length (2 to 11+ years) as well.
- **Retention, not early selection, is the critical system problem.** Unions report dropout of 50%+ between U16–U18 and up to 1 in 3 girls leaving sport in adolescence. 13 of 18 unions

report meaningful structural differences from their male pathways, and unions across all tiers warned against replicating the male model.

What Has Worked

When meaningful competition increases, retention and pathway clarity improve. Dedicated women's leadership and investment measurably accelerated progress wherever introduced, and visible senior success drives aspiration downstream.

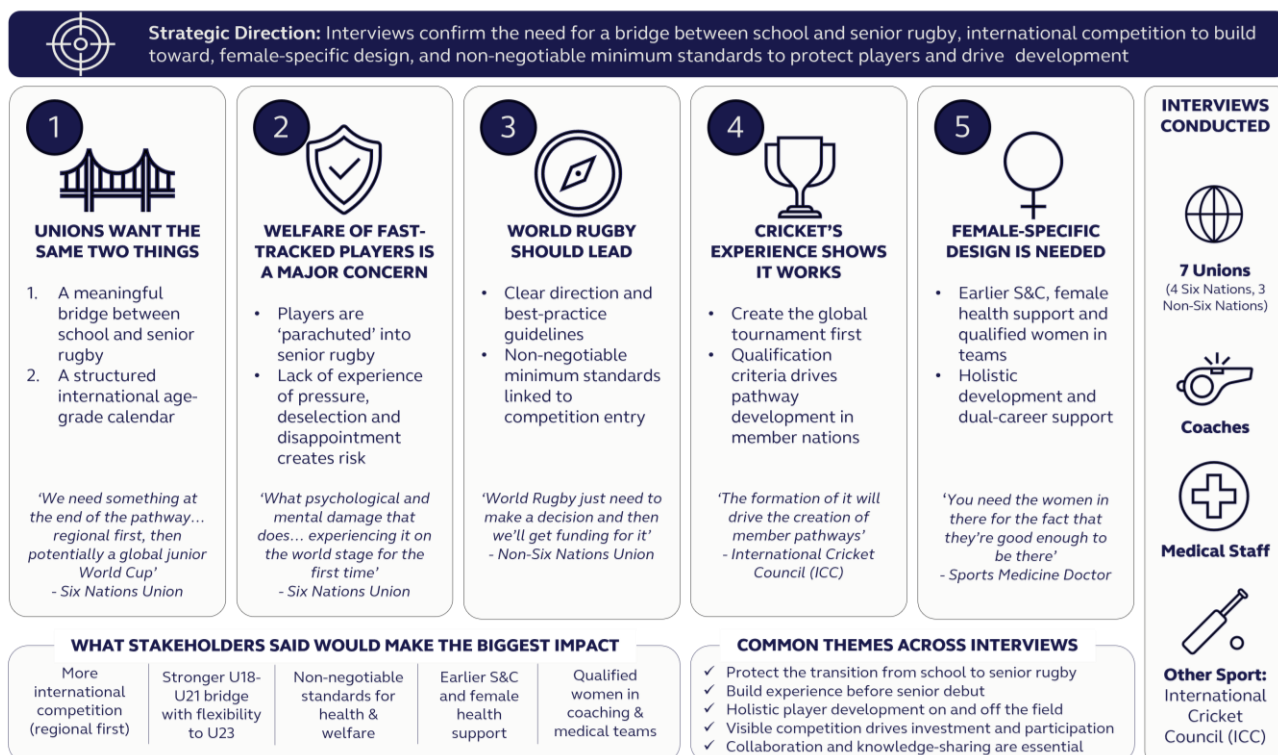
Recommendations

1. **Set 15–16 as the global benchmark for formal talent identification entry** — the survey's de facto norm and consistent with the research on specialisation timing. Entry should mean structured development, not early deselection: selection before this point should be discouraged, and entry after it kept open.
2. **Make the U18–U21 transition the framework's protected priority.** Every union, whatever its tier, should be able to name its post-school offer: a structured U20/U21 competition, a regional cross-border hub, or transitional camps and programmes. This is the survey's single most influential lever.
3. **Formally endorse dual-year (and where needed multi-year) age banding** as an accepted global standard for the female game, with single-year banding reserved for high-density systems.
4. **Provide guidance on the mixed-to-girls-only transition (typically U12–U14),** encouraging earlier girls-only options where numbers allow — unions that introduced them early report better retention and confidence — while retaining mixed and modified formats as entry tools.
5. **Define minimum exposure standards by tier:** Season length, annual match counts and training hours scaled to Established / Developing / Emerging contexts, so that 8-week seasons and festival-only exposure are recognised as below the developmental threshold rather than normalised.
6. **Position 7s deliberately within the framework** — as a legitimate density solution and accelerated development route at U13–U15 and in emerging contexts, integrated with (not competing against) the 15s pathway from U16.
7. **Adopt experience-based readiness benchmarks for senior debut, alongside age:** Training age, contact exposure and physical preparation standards. Two decades of survey and research data agree that chronological age alone is a poor readiness indicator.
8. **Embed female-specific standards in every tier:** growth and maturation awareness, progressive contact-load management, ACL-prevention neuromuscular training, menstrual health literacy, energy-availability (REDs) screening and standardised injury surveillance — from pathway entry, not the elite end.
9. **Build retention architecture, not just selection architecture:** Multiple entry and re-entry points, formal talent-transfer routes, dual-career flexibility around education, and enjoyment and belonging as explicit design goals through the U16–U23 window.

10. **Invest in workforce as a multiplier:** Female coach development, female-physiology content in all age-grade coach education, and dedicated women's pathway leadership roles — the survey shows dedicated governance measurably accelerates progress.
11. **Adopt a tiered 'minimum viable pathway' model rather than a single template,** so that a framework designed for 1,000-player cohorts does not break unions with 25-player cohorts:
12. **Track the system longitudinally.** Common global metrics — retention by age band, transition rates, experience-at-debut, career length, injury surveillance — reported annually, so the framework is evaluated on what the survey shows matters: senior outcomes and retention, not age-grade results.

Tier	Minimum viable pathway
Established (high capacity)	Multi-tier age-grade competition; annualised engagement; embedded sport science, medicine and female health provision; structured U18 and U20/21 international calendar
Developing	U15–U16 entry; U18 competition focus; camp-based U20/21 transitional support building toward continuous competition; developing female health integration
Emerging	Talent ID through domestic competition and festivals; short-cycle representative exposure; regional collaboration and cross-border hubs; foundational welfare and female health standards

SECTION 3: STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS REPORT



Process

Following the 18-union survey, in-depth interviews were conducted with seven unions (four Six Nations and three non-Six Nations) plus age-grade coaches, sports medicine doctors working in the women's game, and a representative of international cricket's governing body, whose women's U19 World Cup offers a directly relevant cross-sport case study. Findings are anonymised, with quotes attributed by stakeholder group only.

Headline Results

- **Both groups of unions want the same two things:** a meaningful bridge between school and senior rugby, and a structured international age-grade calendar to build toward; regional first, global second.
- **Welfare of fast-tracked players is the sharpest new concern.** Interviewees described girls being "parachuted" into senior international rugby without the accumulated experience, such as experiences of disappointment and deselection and the player's ability to cope with it, thus suggested some proposed minimum age selection rules.
- **Non-Six Nations unions are asking World Rugby to decide and to set standards:** clear direction, best-practice guidelines, and minimum standards tied to competition entry (for example, a health and wellbeing programme at U16 before fielding a U18 festival team). They warn the gap between the top nations and the rest is growing.
- **Cricket's experience shows top-down competition creation works.** Establishing a global age-grade tournament with qualification criteria forced member nations to build pathways that did not previously exist. The tournament is the development policy, and its visibility unlocks budgets, coach recruitment and positive messaging to young players.

- **Medical voices add two design requirements:** strength and conditioning must start much earlier for girls, as an injury-prevention issue rather than a performance luxury, and qualified women must be embedded in performance and medical teams; capability-first, not tokenism.

The Pathway Stakeholders Imagined

A development-first U18 stage (“the priority is to develop the players... winning is not the be-all and end-all”), and U21 competition with flexibility toward U23 to keep players in advanced performance systems longer. Around the competitive core: regional, invitation-based festivals at U18 and beyond; a stable, predictable calendar with age brackets held for three-year cycles; and holistic support that reflects what 17-year-old girls are navigating.

Recommendations

These recommendations extend and are consistent with the twelve best-practice recommendations in the Union Survey Report found in Section 2. They represent what the interviewed stakeholders would add:

1. **Announce the end point.** Commit to a defined international age-grade architecture (e.g., U18 regional festivals → U20/U21 global competition) with a published multi-year calendar, so unions can plan and fund backwards from it. Both union groups said alignment and investment follow the decision.
2. **Use qualification criteria as development policy.** Attach non-negotiable minimum standards to age-grade competition entry (health and wellbeing programmes, S&C provision, welfare safeguards) following cricket's demonstrated model and the non-Six Nations unions' explicit request.
3. **Build festivals before finals.** Create regional, invitation-based international festivals at U18 around the competitive core, giving multiple exposure points without making every event a be-all-and-end-all tournament.
4. **Protect fast-tracked players.** Introduce welfare guardrails for accelerated transitions - minimum age and readiness standards for senior international selection, graded exposure, and psychological support for players facing elite competition and deselection for the first time.
5. **Stabilise age bands and cutoffs.** Define global age brackets, hold them for three-year cycles with formal review, and provide guidance for reconciling school-year and calendar-year cutoffs.
6. **Promote earlier strength and conditioning for girls,** positioned as injury prevention, with age-appropriate progression from pathway entry - and consider biological as well as chronological age in competition safety decisions.
7. **Embed qualified women across coaching, medical and performance teams,** supported by female-focused CPD and deliberate recruitment. Capability-first, enabled by the visibility a global competition creates.
8. **Leverage visibility deliberately:** stream and broadcast age-grade events to drive role-model effects, positive body-image messaging, coach recruitment and board-level investment cases in every union.

9. **Manage the equity gap explicitly.** Pair the global competition with regional development investment so the framework narrows, rather than widens, the distance between established and emerging unions.

APPENDIX 1.1 EVIDENCE REVIEW REFERENCES

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