

Committee	Board		
Date paper prepared	05/08/2025	Date of committee meeting	17/09/2023
Subject	Preparing for REF2029: Strategic Options and Opportunities for UHI North, West and Hebrides		
Author	Prof Stuart Gibb, Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange		
Action requested	I. Endorsement sought		
Purpose of the paper	<p>This document seeks to provide an overview of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), explaining what it is, why it matters, and what it means specifically for UHI North, West and Hebrides (NWH) as we prepare for REF2029. It outlines how the REF process works, reviews the performance of UHI and NWH in the previous REF, and considers expected changes in the next assessment. It also explores steps NWH can take to prepare for REF2029, identifying potential investment; assessing associated risks and benefits, and highlighting how we can enhance our research quality, institutional reputation, and access to future funding.</p> <p>Its primary aim is to support informed, strategic decision-making across the institution and it identifies institutional factors that must be proactively addressed to optimise NWH's REF 2029 submission</p>		
Summary of the paper	<p>This paper explains the Research Excellence Framework (REF), why it matters, and how UHI North, West and Hebrides (NWH) should prepare for REF2029. It reviews UHI/NWH's performance in REF2021, outlines expected changes for REF2029, and presents three investment options with associated risks, benefits, and funding implications.</p> <p>The paper's primary recommendation is a stepwise approach: adopt moderate investment now (Option 2), with scope to scale up to major research-led growth (Option 3) if conditions allow.</p> <p>Why REF Matters</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • REF outcomes determine the allocation of ~£2bn p.a. of UK research funding. • UHI currently receives ~£3m annually in REG (Research Excellence Grant), with NWH's share worth ~£275k p.a.. • REF results also drive reputation, recruitment, and competitiveness in national and international rankings. • NWH REF2021 Contribution • 12.4 FTE staff submitted across three Units of Assessment (Earth Systems, Education, Area Studies). 		

- Generated ~£275k annual REG income (c. £2m across a 7-year REF cycle).
- Strongest results in Earth Systems & Environmental Sciences (UoA7) and Area Studies (UoA25).

Options for REF2029 Engagement

Option 1: Minimal Investment (Status Quo)

- Cost: £0–50k/year.
- Maintains current staff submissions (~12 FTE).
- Risks stagnation, low visibility, recruitment challenges.
- REG income: ~£250–275k/year (no growth).

Option 2: Moderate Investment (Recommended Short-term)

- Cost: £100–200k/year.
- Targeted growth in UoA7 & UoA25 (18+ FTE).
- 1–2 strategic recruitments, teaching remission, support for outputs & impact.
- REG income: £400–600k/year (c. £2.4–3.6m over cycle).
- Builds strong research culture without overstretching resources.

Option 3: Research-led Growth (Transformational)

- Cost: £300–400k/year.
- 3–5 recruitments, sabbaticals, teaching remission, support for outputs & impact.
- Potential REG income: £700k–£1m/year (c. £4.2–6m over cycle).
- Major reputational gains, but high financial risk and longer ROI.

Recommendation

- **Adopt Option 2 (moderate investment) for 2025–2026, building a strong REF position through two targeted recruitments in conjunctions with contract alignment, and research time allocation.**
- Reassess in 2026–2028 against national REF guidance and UHI partnership progress, with potential to scale towards Option 3 if viable.
- Post-2029, consolidate gains and plan for enhanced research-led growth in the REF2036 cycle.

	<p>What endorsement is being sought</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategic direction: Commitment to strengthening NWH's REF2029 submission through moderate investment now with potential for scaling. • Resource allocation: Approval of £100–200k per annum investment (2025–2026) to support staff recruitment, research time, and output/impact development. • Institutional alignment: Endorsement that REF preparation is integral to NWH's Research & KE Strategy, with progress monitored through agreed KPIs. <p>The full paper is provided as an appendix</p> <p>It has been endorsed by ELT (19/08/25) and by LT+R Committee (11/09/25)</p>
Consultation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • UHI REF practitioners and working groups • NWH Research and KE Management Group • Reviewed and endorsed by ELT 19/08/25 • REF 2029 Guidance Research Excellence Framework 2029: initial decisions and issues for further consultation - Jisc REF 2029 • Reviewed and endorsed by LT+R Committee 11/09/25
Resource implications	Outlined above and in full paper
Risk implications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial: Investment may not be matched by increased REG income; future funding levels uncertain; salary commitments could outpace returns. • Strategic/Organisational: Risk of misalignment with UHI's REF strategy; overstretching resources; vulnerability to REF rule changes. • People: Recruitment and retention challenges; risk of staff outputs/impact being lost if people leave; staff morale could suffer if under- or over-invested. • Performance: Quality of outputs and impact case studies not guaranteed; risk of diluting GPA if more staff submitted without strong outputs. • Reputation: Low investment risks stagnation and invisibility; high investment risks reputational damage if results don't match spend.

Link with strategy	Link to strategy: Progress will be monitored through NWH's Research and Knowledge Exchange KPIs, all ten of which align with REF priorities, with four explicitly designed to support REF-specific outcomes (2, 3, 6, 10)
<u>Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion</u>	.
Island Community Impact	Content and implications equally applicable to all NWH staff
Paper status	<input type="checkbox"/> Open – The paper may be circulated to non-members of the committee and published online without restriction. <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Restricted – The paper must not be circulated to non-members or published online until after the committee meeting. <input type="checkbox"/> Confidential - The paper must not be circulated beyond the committee members and should not be published online. Some information is considered commercially sensitive. [Please note papers may still be subject to Freedom of Information requests – see below].
<u>Freedom of information</u>	Choose an item. FOISA exemptions Scottish Information Commissioner (itspublicknowledge.info) If closed/ withheld, select date this will become 'open': Enter a date.