

Preparing for REF2029: Strategic Options and Opportunities for UHI North, West and Hebrides

Purpose

This document seeks to provide a 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.

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

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)

Document status: Revised following review by R+KE Management at meeting 140725

What is the REF?

The **Research Excellence Framework (REF)** is the UK's national system for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions (HEIs). It was introduced in 2014, replacing the earlier Research Assessment Exercise (RAE). It has since been conducted twice: in 2014 and 2021, with the next REF scheduled for 2029 <https://2029.ref.ac.uk/>.

The stated vision of REF2029 is “**Securing a world-class, dynamic and responsive research base across the full academic spectrum within UK higher education**” (REF, 2029). It plays a critical role in:

- **Selective allocation of funding for research:** REF outcomes directly influence the distribution of approximately **£2 billion per year** across UK HEIs, primarily through the **Research Excellence Grant (REG)**. For UHI, this funding is around **£3 million annually**.
- **Benchmarking research performance**, offering reputational insights across the sector. REF results are used to generate a series of widely published ranking tables (e.g. by institution and subject).
- **Provide accountability** for public investment in research and demonstrate the benefits of this investment.

How does the REF work?

HEIs make submissions to the REF across subject-specific categories called **Units of Assessment (UoAs)**. There are **34 UoAs**, grouped under **four main panels**:

- A:** Medicine, Health and Life Sciences (UoAs 1–6)
- B:** Physical Sciences, Engineering and Mathematics (UoAs 7–12)
- C:** Social Sciences (UoAs 13–24)
- D:** Arts & Humanities (UoAs 25–34)

REF2021 data are summarised in the figure.

HEIs are assessed and allocated funding based on two primary metrics under the REF:



1. Quality of Research

Quality is measured by the **Grade Point Average (GPA)**, a weighted average (0–4 scale) across three submission components for each Unit of Assessment (UoA): **Research outputs** (e.g. journal articles); **Impact case studies** and **Research environment statements**

Each of these elements is evaluated by expert panels according to the originality, significance, and rigour of the research, using the following scale:

- 4*** – Quality that is **world-leading**
- 3*** – Quality that is **internationally excellent**
- 2*** – Quality that is **recognised internationally**
- 1*** – Quality that is **recognised nationally**
- Unclassified (U)** – Below the standard of nationally recognised work or not eligible for REF

Only research rated **3*** or **4*** contributes to **REG (Research Excellence Grant)** funding.

Notably, **4*** research typically yields approximately four times the financial return of **3*** research. Thus, to maximise funding, HEIs should aim for research outputs and activities that are consistently rated **world-leading (4*)** or **internationally excellent (3*)**.

2. Volume of Research Activity

The second key metric is **volume**, measured by the number of academic staff submitted to the REF, adjusted using **Full-Time Equivalent (FTE)** calculations. **1.0 FTE = One** full-time academic staff member and part-time staff are counted proportionally to their working hours

This metric reflects the scale of research activity at an institution and directly influences the total funding allocation.

How did UHI perform in REF 2021?

Based on quality (GPA), UHI has risen from a rank of:

107th in the UK in RAE 2008, to

78th in REF 2014, to

70th in REF 2021 (see appendix)

In REF 2021 the **University of the Highlands and Islands (UHI)** submitted research for assessment in the following seven UoAs (those in bold involved NWH)

UoA	Discipline	FTE Submitted (Volume)	Grade point average (Quality)	Key Results
3	Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing & Pharmacy	23.60	2.98	45% of outputs rated 3* or 4* (internationally excellent or world-leading).
7	Earth Systems & Environmental Sciences	42.22	3.16	67% of outputs rated 3* or 4*. Strong impact and environment elements.
15	Archaeology	9.65	3.22	Over 70% of outputs rated 3* or 4*. High scores for impact case studies.
23	Education	9.64	1.63	Mixed results; limited size affected score depth.
25	Area Studies	18.03	3.14	Over 50% of outputs rated 3* or 4*. Strong in both impact and environment.
26	Modern Languages & Linguistics	6.0	2.96	Smaller submission; most outputs rated 2* or above.
28	History	7.3	2.65	Solid output performance; impact helped balance the overall profile

In REF2021 **NWH** (via its legacy institutes) submitted **14 staff (12.4 FTE)** in three UoAs:

UoA 7	Earth Systems & Environmental Sciences	11 staff (9.8FT)	Thurso (ERI)
UoA23	Education	1 staff (1.0 FTE)	Stornoway
UoA 25	Area Studies	2 staff (1.6FTE)	Fort William

The REG income for NWH is ~£275,000 per annum, equating to just under £2M for an assumed 7-year REF cycle period. This represents 'core' funding to support research endeavour at UHI-NWH equivalent to just over £22k per FTE per annum in the case of UoA 7 and £13k in the case of UoA25). This income is used primarily to support staff salaries

How will REF 2029 work?

The framework for REF2029 is still under development. However, it is known that each submission to a UoA will comprise three main components, assessed by expert panels and weighted as follows:



People, Culture & Environment Statement (25%): A narrative outlining the institutional context that supports research, including staff development, inclusivity, infrastructure, and strategic direction. In REF2029, this section will place greater emphasis on a positive, inclusive, and supportive research culture than in previous REF cycles.

Outputs (50%): The quality of research outputs (e.g. journal articles, books, and other scholarly works) will be assessed for originality, significance, and rigour. This remains the largest single component of the submission.

Impact Case Studies (25%): Case studies that evidence the real-world impact of research beyond academia—e.g., on policy, practice, the economy, or society. These must demonstrate a clear and evidenced link between UHI-generated research and the impacts claimed, supported by robust documentation and narrative clarity.

How will UHI respond to REF2029 work?

Funding from REF is primarily allocated through the Research Excellence Grant (REG), which currently provides UHI with approximately £3 million per year.

Final decisions have not yet been made by UHI regarding which Units of Assessment (UoAs) will be submitted for REF2029. However, the current expectation is that the submission will mirror that of REF2021, but excluding UoA23, due to the currently limited size and strength of UHI's research base in that area. Greater clarity is expected in early 2026.

To manage the process UHI will use teams on eight workpackages 'Contract Eligibility'; 'Significant Responsibility for Research & Research Independence'; 'Output Selection'; 'Code of Practice'; 'Impact and Engagement'; 'People, Culture and Environment'; 'REF 2029 Internal Annual Progress Reviews'. This document seeks only to highlight some key points.

NWH and REF2029

While considerations are ongoing, it currently appears that UHI North, West and Hebrides (NWH) will be able to contribute to:

Area Studies (UoA25): Main challenges - Quality of outputs; Explicit research requirements in contracts for two current Knowledge Exchange associates; Teaching remission for research activities for three teaching staff

Earth Systems & Environmental Sciences (UoA7): Main challenges -Quality of outputs; Clear contractual terms for all research-active staff [REF regulations regarding staff who left during the assessment period (particularly relevant due to high turnover at ERI in last two years)]

NWH – REF2029: Options for Development and Investment

The following strategic options for NWH’s REF2029 engagement outline required investment levels and identify key risks, potential rewards, and institutional benefits.

Option 1: Minimal Investment – Maintain Baseline

Summary: Maintain existing research activity and REF preparation, limited to current known REF-active staff (c.12.4 FTE across UoA7 and UoA25).

Investment

- Very low (£0–50k per annum):
- Limited backfill or remission
- No additional recruitment

Risks

- Low growth in REG income
- Loss of momentum in research culture and runs counter to strategy
- Missed opportunities for early-career staff
- Reduced visibility and influence within UHI REF strategy
- Potential exclusion from broader UHI UoAs due to weak positioning
- Morale and recruitment challenges

Rewards

- Avoidance of significant expenditure
- Maintains minimum REF presence

Institutional Benefits

- Continuity of REF contribution with low cost
- Retains presence in key UoAs (7 and 25)

Option 2: Moderate Investment – Targeted Growth

Summary: Targeted investment to grow submissions in UoA7 and UoA25; increase FTE to ~18 in UoA7 and 4–6 in UoA25 through staff development and contract alignment.

Investment

- Medium (£100k–200k per annum)
- Internal restructuring to provide research time
- Modest external recruitment (1–2 strategic hires)
- Support for output development and impact planning

Risks

- Medium-term cost without guaranteed income increase
- Difficulty in managing workload redistribution
- Dependency on REF rules (e.g. contract wording, attribution of impact)

Rewards

- Increased REG income potential (~£400–600k per annum)
- Strengthened staff morale and retention
- Improved research profile and collaboration across UHI
- Better eligibility for future funding and doctoral training partnerships

Institutional Benefits

- Realistic growth aligned with current capability
- Strengthens culture of research and innovation
- Builds REF submission quality without overstretching resources

Option 3: Research Investment led Growth

Summary: Institutional shift to significantly enhance research capacity and REF2029 submission across multiple UoAs (e.g., UoA7, UoA25, potential alignment with other UoAs e.g. Archaeology)

Investment

- High (£300k–£400k per annum)
- 3–5 new strategic hires
- Full-time research support (impact officer, REF coordinator)
- Sabbaticals/remission for output generation
- Strong internal REF governance and training

Risks

- High financial outlay
- Increased exposure if REF rules change unfavourably
- Time lag in seeing return on investment (REG lag post-2029)
- Possible internal tensions over shifting focus/resources

Rewards

- Significantly increased REG income potential (£700k–£1M p.a.)
- Higher REF GPA and national standing
- Increased success in external funding bids
- Attraction of high-calibre researchers and postgraduate students

Institutional Benefits

- Research becomes central to NWH's identity and mission
- Stronger voice and influence within UHI and wider HE landscape
- Foundation for long-term sustainability and innovation

Summary Table

Option	Investment Level	Estimated REG	Key Risks	Key Benefits
1	£0–50k/year Sum: £0-200k to end of REF 2021 cycle	£250–275k/year (status quo) Sum: £1500-1650k from REF 2029 (6 yr)	Reputational stagnation, low visibility. Recruitment challenges, misaligned with strategy and ethos Reduction in REG	Maintains presence with minimal cost
2	£100–200k/year Sum: £400-800k to end of REF 2021 cycle	£400–600k/year Sum: £2400-3600 from REF 2029 (6 yr)	Medium-term cost, role tension	Increased income, stronger research culture
3	£300–400k/year Sum: £1200-1600k to end of REF 2021 cycle	£700k–1M/year Sum: £4200-6000 from REF 2029 (6 yr)	High financial risk, longer ROI timeline	Transformational growth, national standing, enhanced recruitment and grant capture

Notes:

Ongoing salary commitments may be deducted from REG income e.g. option 2 £100-200k per annum

In all cases, the internal allocation of REG is an important consideration and may pose a risk if expectations are not clearly and consistently defined before and after the submission.

Recommendations

A stepwise approach is recommended for NWH's engagement in REF 2029:

Short-Term (2025–2026): Adopt Option 2 – moderate investment to build a strong, achievable REF2029 position, with flexibility to scale up if national funding prospects improve.

Medium-Term (2026–2028): Evaluate REF panel guidance, UHI's internal progress reviews, and revise trajectory towards Option 3 if viable.

Long-Term (Post-2029): Position NWH for enhanced research-led growth in the next REF cycle (2036), building on infrastructure and culture developed during REF2029.

REG income

It is important to note that an increase in the number and ‘quality’ of staff submitted to REF does not automatically result in increased REG (Research Excellence Grant) income. The outcome will depend on several factors:

- The **overall level of REG funding** allocated to the sector after REF2029 (which may increase, decrease, or remain static)
- The **distribution** of staff submissions across UHI and its partners

For example, if all UHI partners submit proportionally more staff, but the total REG funding allocated to UHI remains flat, then NWH’s share of that funding may remain unchanged or even decrease. However, all else being equal, if UHI’s overall REG allocation increases post-REF2029, and/or NWH contributes a larger proportion of staff than in REF2021, with high-quality research outputs then NWH’s share of REG income may increase after 2029.

Optimising the NWH REF2029 Submission

To maximise the quality, eligibility, and return of NWH’s contribution to REF2029, the following factors must be proactively addressed:

1. Contractual Eligibility: To be eligible for submission, staff must hold contracts that explicitly require them to undertake independent research. This includes Knowledge Exchange and teaching staff who may be research-active but whose current roles do not formally include research responsibilities. A review and alignment of contractual terms is needed.

Responsibility: NWH HR Director / UHI Dean of Research / R+KE Management Group

2. Research Time and Teaching Remission: Enabling staff to deliver high-quality outputs and impact requires protected time for research. Teaching staff must be have remission to engage in research and KE activities (e.g. grant writing, project delivery, publication, and PGR supervision). This should be embedded in working models and supported institutionally.

Responsibility: Head of Curriculum / NWH HR Director / R+KE Management Group

3. Independent Research Leadership: REF-eligible staff must demonstrate responsibility for leading their own research agendas. This means taking primary responsibility for developing research ideas, securing funding, and producing outputs (rather than operating under the supervision of others).

Responsibility: All research staff and line managers / R+KE Management Group

4. Staff Recruitment and Retention: To build a robust REF submission, NWH must be able to attract and retain high-calibre researchers. Competitive salaries, career development pathways, and parity with sector norms in terms and conditions are essential. Note: REF2029 rules specify that outputs and case studies must come from work conducted at the submitting institution and that outputs are not portable between HEIs. This underscores the importance of investing early in the REF cycle to ensure outputs and impact are attributable to UHI.

Responsibility: NWH HR Director / UHI Dean of Research / R+KE Management Group

5. Research Performance and Output Quality: Regular production of high-quality research outputs by all REF-submitted staff is critical. A sustained portfolio of publications (beyond occasional outputs) will enhance the unit's overall submission strength. Mentoring, peer review processes, and internal quality assurance should support this.

Responsibility: All research staff; NWH REF Coordinator; / R+KE Management Group

6. Evolving REF Rules and the UHI Code of Practice: The final REF2029 guidance and the UHI REF Code of Practice are still under development. These will affect decisions around eligibility, output selection, and staff allocation. NWH must remain flexible and engaged with institutional REF planning to adapt effectively as guidance evolves.

Responsibility: UHI REF Manager / NWH REF Coordinator / Governance & Compliance Teams

7. Strategic Allocation Across UoAs: While NWH's core contributions are expected in UoA7 (Earth Systems & Environmental Sciences) and UoA25 (Area Studies), there may be scope for staff to contribute to other UoAs led by UHI partners. For example, NWH researchers in Archaeology might align with Orkney colleagues in UoA15; or education-focused staff could align with History (UoA28) if outputs are appropriately scoped. A collaborative approach across the partnership will be required to optimise individual and institutional returns.

Responsibility: Dean of Research / REF Strategy Group/ UoA Leads across UHI Partnership

Monitoring NWH REF progress

NWH has agreed ten Research and KE KPIs in its Research and knowledge exchange strategy. All are relevant to the REF either directly (shown in bold) or through the people, culture and environment statement (those that are specifically embedded in the REF process are shown in bold):

1. Number of staff recognised as being 'research active'
- 2. Number of staff eligible for inclusion in REF 2029**
- 3. Number of staff submitted to REF 2029**
4. PGR student enrolment
5. Number of staff involved in PGR supervision 2028
- 6. Number of outputs published in international peer-reviewed journals**
7. Number of Research and KE projects secured with regional and national partners
8. Income from research
9. Income from KE
- 10. Income from REF**

Appendix:

UHI in REF 2021

Scotland:

UHI was ranked 11th in Scotland by GPA in 2021, the highest ranked modern University

UHI ranking and comparison performance by GPA - Scotland												
Rank	HEI	Cat A										QI
		FTE	4*	3*	2*	1*	U/C	4*/3*	GPA	QI		
1	University of Glasgow	1377.69	51	42	7	0	0	93	3.43	76.0		
2	University of Edinburgh	2562.98	52	39	9	1	0	91	3.42	76.0		
3	University of St Andrews	664.03	42	47	11	0	0	89	3.31	71.0		
4	University of Strathclyde	732.45	41	48	10	1	0	89	3.29	71.0		
5	University of Dundee	461.25	40	44	14	1	0	84	3.23	69.0		
6	Glasgow School of Art	49.40	42	40	17	1	0	82	3.23	69.0		
7	SRUC	104.99	38	49	11	1	1	87	3.22	68.0		
8	Heriot-Watt University	422.42	36	51	12	1	0	87	3.22	68.0		
9	University of Stirling	446.47	31	50	17	1	0	82	3.11	64.0		
10	University of Aberdeen	698.13	25	54	20	1	0	79	3.03	61.0		
11	UHI	116.44	30	42	23	5	0	72	2.96	59.0		
12	Glasgow Caledonian University	216.77	27	45	23	4	0	72	2.95	59.0		
13	Edinburgh Napier University	251.06	21	47	29	3	0	68	2.86	55.0		
14	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	26.41	26	37	31	6	0	63	2.83	55.0		
15	Abertay University	110.77	13	48	33	6	0	60	2.66	48.0		
16	Queen Margaret University	76.80	19	32	38	9	1	51	2.59	47.0		
17	Robert Gordon University	84.06	11	40	41	8	0	51	2.54	44.0		
18	University of the West of Scotland	272.40	9	40	40	10	0	49	2.48	42.0		

UK: UHI was ranked 107th in the UK in RAE 2008 by GPA, 78th in REF 2014, to 70th in REF 2021.

UHI ranking and comparison according to THE by GPA											
HEI	2008			2014			2021			position	2021 GPA
	position	GPA	HEI	position	2014 GPA	HEI	position	2021 GPA	HEI		
Institute of Cancer Research	1	3.15	Institute of Cancer Research	1	3.40	Imperial College London	1	3.63			
Cambridge University	2	2.98	Imperial College London	2	3.36	Institute of Cancer Research	2	3.58			
London School of Hy & Trop Med	3	2.97	London School of Economics	3	3.35	University of Cambridge	3=	3.53			
University of Oxford & LSE	4=	2.96	University of Oxford	4	3.34	London School of Economics	3=	3.53			
University of Edinburgh	12	2.75	University of Edinburgh	14	3.18	University of Bristol	5	3.51			
University of St Andrews	14=	2.72	University of St Andrews	23	3.13	University of Oxford	7	3.49			
University of Glasgow	33=	2.59	SRUC	25	3.13	University of Glasgow	13	3.43			
University of Aberdeen	38	2.57	University of Glasgow	31	3.09	University of Edinburgh	14	3.42			
University of Dundee	40=	2.54	Heriot-Watt University	42	3.06	University of St Andrews	28	3.31			
Heriot Watt University	45=	2.48	University of Strathclyde	45	3.04	University of Strathclyde	33	3.29			
Strathclyde University	50	2.45	University of Dundee	47	3.03	University of Dundee	42	3.23			
University of Stirling	66=	2.41	University of Aberdeen	56	2.97	Heriot-Watt University	46	3.22			
ECA	87	2.28	University of Stirling	58	2.96	University of Stirling	51	3.11			
RGU	93=	2.06	Royal Conservatoire of Scotland	68	2.85	University of Aberdeen	61	3.03			
GCU	96=	2.01	UHI	78=	2.76	UHI	70	2.96			
UHI (MI)	107=	1.96	Glasgow School of Art	78=	2.67	Glasgow Caledonian University	72	2.95			
UWS	107=	1.84	Glasgow Caledonian University	99	2.64	Edinburgh Napier University	78	2.86			
Abertay & Napier		1.83	QMU Edinburgh	108	2.52	Abertay University	101	2.66			
			Edinburgh Napier University	112	2.41	Queen Margaret University	105	2.65			
			University of the West of Scotland	121	2.36	Robert Gordon University	108	2.54			
			Robert Gordon University	123	2.35	University of the West of Scotland	115	2.48			
			University of Abertay Dundee	133	2.15	GSA and RCS not listed					