UHI | **NORTH, WEST AND HEBRIDES**
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Understanding Scholarship, Research and REF at UHI-NWH

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Purpose of this Guide

Research is a core function of Scottish universities, integral to their mission alongside teaching and knowledge exchange. This brief guide aims to help staff understand some of the distinctions between **research, scholarship and advanced scholarship.** It outlines what it means to be **research active** and provides a summary of the **REF (Research Excellence Framework)**.

Link to strategies: This document is linked to the 2022-5 UHI Research, Impact and Knowledge Exchange Strategic Plan and 2025-8 UHI NWH Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy. The number of staff designated as being 'Research Active' and eligible and / or entered into the REF are KPIs for UHI NWH. They will be monitored by Research and KE Management Group and reported to the Executive and Board of Management on an annual basis.

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The Scholarship–Research Continuum
In the UHI context, we may define scholarship, advanced scholarship and research activity as follows:

Scholarship (Foundational synthesis of knowledge)
- Involves becoming expert in a field through extensive reading, understanding, and synthesis of existing knowledge.
- Outputs typically include teaching materials, textbooks, and publications that explain or interpret existing ideas.
- Aimed at helping others understand subject areas, rather than generating new knowledge.
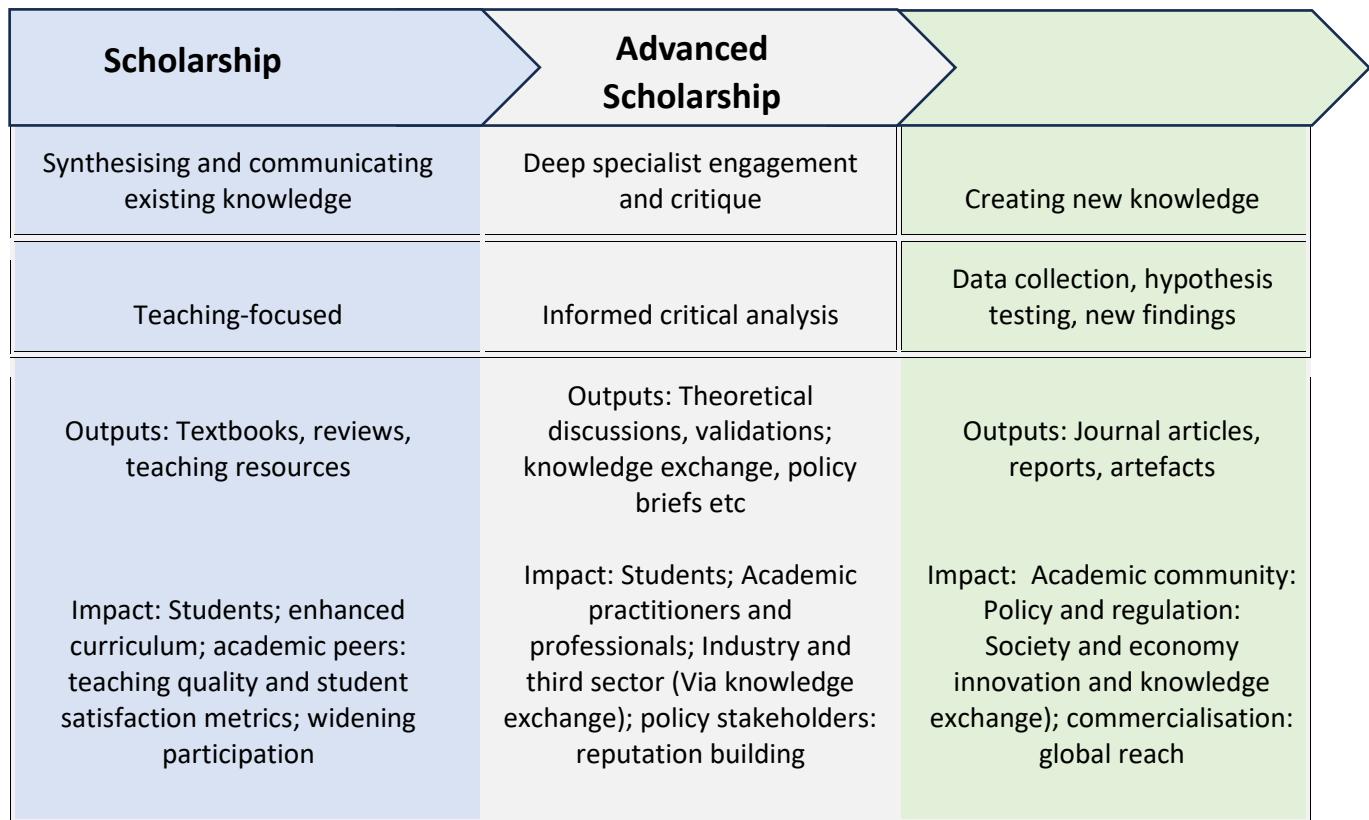
Advanced Scholarship (Critical analysis/validation of existing work)
- Goes deeper into a subject, involving specialised knowledge and critical engagement with existing research.
- May include small-scale primary data collection (e.g. focus groups, surveys).
- Outputs can clarify or challenge current thinking but usually do not create new knowledge.

Research (Original contribution and new knowledge creation)
- Focused on answering questions that do not yet have clear answers—this generates **new knowledge**.
- Uses primary and/or secondary sources and applies new methods or interpretations.
- Outputs contribute directly to academic literature or discipline-specific outputs (e.g. exhibitions, software).

Think of **Scholarship**, **Advanced Scholarship**, and **Research** as points on a continuum. An individual may move between these activities over time. For example, a "research active" academic might still produce scholarship-based outputs, and vice versa.

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Scholarship	Advanced Scholarship	
Synthesising and communicating existing knowledge	Deep specialist engagement and critique	Creating new knowledge
Teaching-focused	Informed critical analysis	Data collection, hypothesis testing, new findings
Outputs: Textbooks, reviews, teaching resources Impact: Students; enhanced curriculum; academic peers: teaching quality and student satisfaction metrics; widening participation	Outputs: Theoretical discussions, validations; knowledge exchange, policy briefs etc Impact: Students; Academic practitioners and professionals; Industry and third sector (Via knowledge exchange); policy stakeholders: reputation building	Outputs: Journal articles, reports, artefacts Impact: Academic community: Policy and regulation: Society and economy innovation and knowledge exchange); commercialisation: global reach

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What It Means to Be 'Research Active' at UHI-NWH

In general, **at UHI,** a **research active individual**:
- Is employed in a role that includes **research responsibilities**,
- Is expected to produce **research outputs** consistently (not just occasionally),
- Contributes to building **new knowledge** in their field through empirical, theoretical, or creative research.

Being research active is not just about publishing occasionally—it's about having **research as a core, ongoing part of your activity**.

At NWH we further qualify what it means to be 'Research Active' based on the following definition:

A **"Research Active"** individual is a colleague who pursues research on an ongoing basis, as a significant part of their academic activity. This is indicated by: 1. Evidence of at least one research-driven peer-reviewed publication in the last 24 months. These could include peer-reviewed journal articles, refereed book chapters, etc.

AND:

2 a. Supervision of postgraduate research students either as the main supervisor (DoS) or other named supervisor within the last 24 months, **AND/OR:**
b. Evidence of applications to external agencies for funding as a PI or co-applicant for research and/or KE projects within the last 24 months (this does not include travel grants from the University).

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REF 2029

The **Research Excellence Framework (REF)** is the UK's system for assessing the quality of research in higher education institutions (HEIs). Results are significant as they influence:

•   **Research funding allocations (the annual Research Excellence Grant (REG) returned to HEIs)**

•   **Reputation and league tables (comparing HEIs and subject area rankings)**

The last REF took place in 2021 - Results and submissions: REF 2021

Submissions to the next REF 2029 is expected to take place in late 2028, and preparation of the UHI submission is ongoing.

In REF 2021, UHI submitted evidence of research excellence in the following Units of Assessment (UOAs):

1.   Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy (UOA 3)

2.   Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences (UOA 7)

3.   Archaeology (UOA 15)

4.   Education (UOA 23)

5.   Area Studies (UOA 25)

6.   Modern Languages and Linguistics (UOA 26)

7.   History (UOA 28)

These submissions reflected UHI's research strengths at the time in health sciences, environmental studies, humanities, and social sciences. Each submission was assessed based on research outputs, research impact case studies, and research environment, together contributing to the overall quality profile for each UOA.

For further information see: Research Excellence Framework - Our REF2021 Results

Key components of REF 2029

The REF is a complex and challenging process. For REF 2029 guidance for submissions are only emerging. 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.

There are three main components to the REF assessment:

1. People, Culture & Environment Statement: This will involve a narrative about the "People, Culture & Environment" which supports research at UHI, and this element will be **weighted as 25%** of the overall score. In REF 2029, there will be a greater emphasis placed on research environment and an inclusive culture (than has been the case in previous REF exercises). To give examples of what may be included:

People - How research staff and students are supported, developed, and valued. Examples may include Mentorship schemes for early-career researchers (ECRs); Career development plans and training opportunities and support for diverse career paths (academic, industrial, policy) etc.

Culture: How a positive, inclusive, and collaborative research culture is fostered. Examples may include Commitment to equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) (e.g. Athena Swan, Race Equality Charter); promotion of interdisciplinary working and team science measures to prevent bullying and harassment etc.

Environment - How the infrastructure and strategic priorities enable high-quality research. Examples may include Investment in labs, equipment, and research facilities; external partnerships (e.g. with industry, policy bodies), strategic support for research themes aligned with institutional and national priorities etc

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2. Outputs: The quality of research outputs (e.g., articles, books, artworks) will be scored and this will be **weighted at 50%** of the overall score**.**

The REF (Research Excellence Framework) uses a 1 to 4-star rating system to assess the 'originality, significance and rigour' of research outputs:

4★ – World-leading quality in terms of originality, significance, and rigour.

3★ – Internationally excellent but falls short of the highest standards.

2★ – Recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance, and rigour (good quality work, but not exceptional or groundbreaking).

1★ – Recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance, and rigour (sound work but limited international relevance/scope).

Unclassified - Falls below the standard of nationally recognised work or does not meet certain REF criteria for 'research' (i.e., includes review papers with no new data generated).

3. Impact: Real-world impacts of research (beyond academia) are presented as detailed narrative 'case-studies'. Impact Case Studies are **weighted at 25%** of the overall score. These should demonstrate a clear link between research undertaken (as demonstrated by outputs) and 'impacts' on the ground (i.e., economic impacts, legislative change, societal benefits). Narratives must be supported by clear 'evidence' of impacts, and links between UHI generated research and claimed impacts must be obvious.

Staff Inclusion in REF

Staff eligible for inclusion will be identified using a UHI 'HESA-light' assessment of staff roles (HESA = Higher Education Statistics Agency). That is:

- If they have a **'research only' or 'research and teaching' contract** (i.e. research needs to be explicit in the contract), AND
- Have **significant responsibility for research or self-directed research**

  Volume: Staff meeting the above criteria would then be counted in the 'volume measure' used to calculate the number of outputs and case studies required to be submitted by any UoA.
  Attribution of outputs is now decoupled from individuals, so the HESA based assessment dictates who is eligible, how many Full Time Equivalents (FTEs) and thus how many outputs are required. Hence all eligible staff may not necessarily submit an output, but on average it may equate to about 2.5 outputs per FTE staff.
  Institutions submit outputs from a collective pool, allowing flexibility in selecting the highest-quality outputs and reduced burden and pressure on individuals.

  Quality: All potential research outputs will be self-scored by the staff member, and then externally scored by at least two external reviewers (arranged/invited by UHI UoA leads). Only papers considered (internally and externally) as 3* or 4* are likely to be submitted (as only these result in any REG funding)

Further information

NWH Staff seeking further information about the REF should contact their UHI UoA lead, or Mark.Taggart@ac.uk

A briefing on 'Preparing for REF2029: Strategic Options and Opportunities for UHI North, West and Hebrides' will accompany this document

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