

University of the Highlands and Islands.

Research Excellence Framework 2021 Results

Introduction

The Research Excellence Framework is an assessment of the research capability and output across United Kingdom universities and higher education institutions. It occurs approximately once every six years, and the outcomes are significant in terms of reputation and finance for individual institutions.

For REF 2021, universities have been judged on:

1. The quality of their research output (60% of the assessment);
2. The impact of their research (25% of the assessment) and;
3. The research environment (15% of the assessment).

It should be remembered that whilst it is inevitable that comparisons are made both with other institutions and with the 2014 outcomes, REF 2021 was very different to REF 2014. In REF 2014, institutions were able to select staff for inclusion, whereas in REF 2021 institutions were obliged to include all research active staff.

In broad terms a four-point scale is used to assess the quality of the various elements of the REF:

4 Exceptional.* Quality that is world-leading and meets the highest standards of excellence in terms of originality, significance and rigour;

3 Excellent.* Quality that is internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour, but which nonetheless falls short of the highest standards of excellence;

2 Very Good.* Quality that is recognised internationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

1 Good.* Quality that is recognised nationally in terms of originality, significance and rigour.

Unclassified. Quality that falls below the standard of nationally recognised work.

Or work which does not meet the published definition of research for the purposes of this assessment.

UHI's submission consisted of:

138 researchers, 9 former staff members, 15 Early Career Researchers (117.04fte in total), 267 research outputs and 17 case studies.

We submitted in 7 Units of assessment:

Unit 3 Allied Health Professions, Dentistry and Nursing (School of Health and Social Care, including Department of Nursing and Midwifery and UHI Inverness);

Unit 7 Earth Systems and Environmental Science (SAMS, UHI Inverness, UHI North Highland College, UHI Orkney and UHI Shetland);

Unit 15 Archaeology (UHI Orkney, UHI Outer Hebrides);

Unit 23 Education (UHI Inverness, UHI Outer Hebrides, Perth College UHI, Teacher Education)

Unit 25 Area Studies (UHI Orkney, UHI Shetland, UHI Inverness, UHI Moray, Perth College UHI, SAMS, UHI West Highland);

Unit 26 Modern Foreign Languages (Sabhal Mòr Ostaig, UHI Language Sciences Institute);

Unit 28 History (Centre for History).

Key Institutional Outcomes

- Overall, the 2021 REF results are very strong. We have significantly enhanced our 2014 REF position and have consolidated our position as a research credible and research respected institution. Our overall grade point average increased from 2.76 to 2.96. This was supported by excellent performances in outputs and, particularly, impact. Research environment scores were not as strong and showed some decline since 2014.
- In regard to research outputs (60% of the assessment) we have seen significant improvement from our 2014 performance in regard to 4* outputs, rising from 11.05% of outputs in 2014 to 25.63% in 2021. Our overall performance increased from 2.66 to 2.89 GPA. This performance is especially significant given that research outputs are proportionally the most important factor in the overall assessment.
- In regard to research impact (25% of the assessment) we have seen significant improvement from our 2014 position in regard to our 4* performance, rising from 12.02% to 49.43% of the total impact results being deemed to be 4*. This performance now ensures that for impact the University has risen by 16 places in the Times Higher Education table to joint 49th in the UK. Our overall impact performance increased from 2.99 to 3.30. This is an especially good outcome given the mission of our university to have impact on communities within the region and beyond.
- In regard to environment (15% of the assessment) our performance is less strong and we have seen an overall decline in our GPA compared to 2014 from 2.91 to 2.70. This is a clear area for focus in the years ahead and we will need to consider carefully the utilisation of REG funding. Aspects such as staff development, the concordats, research student training and education, equality, diversity and inclusion, research income, PhD studentships, and research infrastructure and capital spend are all included in this. There is much to build upon, especially in regard to the work we have already done in regard to training and education for research students. We will also need to consider carefully how we migrate from a dependency in some areas on European, HIE and City region deal funds to research council, commercial and charity funding.
- Looking at the individual units of assessment, there are some very strong results in a number of areas, and the detail can be seen in the attached table. Our four largest Units (3, 7, 15 and 25) all saw significant improvements compared with 2014. This can be illustrated by a 100% 4* research impact in Unit 25, Area Studies, a doubling of 4* research outputs in Unit 7, Environmental Science, 39.1% 4* outputs in Unit 15, Archaeology, and a doubling of 4* outputs and impacts in Unit 3, Health. The three other Units also had some positive points. Unit 26, Gaelic, saw 4* outputs rise from 13 to 20%, and whilst History reported an overall decline, the proportion of 4* outputs rose from 6% to 15%. Unit 23, education, was an entry level submission and no direct comparisons can be made.

- In comparison with other institutions, we have held our place (9th out of 15) in the Scottish rankings and are ahead of Glasgow Caledonian University, Edinburgh Napier University, Abertay University, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University and the University of the West of Scotland. The research intensive universities are ahead of us as would be expected, but we are close to the University of Aberdeen which is 8th in the table. In regard to the UK, most Scottish universities have seen a decline in the relative position as compared with 2014, and this perhaps raises a question about the level of investment in research from the SFC. Whilst UHI rose in the UK impact table as reported above, we have seen a slight decline overall and are equal 70th in the THE table (from 63rd in 2014).

Immediate Next Steps

The Research Excellence Grant (REG) is dependent on the REF results, and the sector across Scotland was advised of the indicative allocations for 2022/23 at the end of May 2022. 8 universities and higher education institutions in Scotland saw a decline in their research and innovation grant income, with two others in an approximately flat cash position. Overall UHI's research and innovation grants for 2022/23 have increased by around 7% to £4.052M, and within this we have a 17% increase in our REG income, some £404K, rising to £2.78M. Internally we are currently modelling options for the distribution of the funds across research areas, which both rewards research performance and participation, but which also ensures that we can build further on these very good results for the next REF.

Conclusion

Overall, this is a very good set of results for UHI. We have made progress in a number of areas, especially in outputs and impact, as compared with 2014, and have seen some really strong performances particularly from our larger research units. There is much to build upon and our future planning and activity need to focus on a number of areas:

- Showcasing the excellent results which have been achieved across the Units of Assessment, and the overall success that we have achieved as an institution;
- A clear focus on enhancing the research environment, with associated investment, in areas such as staff development, the concordats, research student training and education, equality and diversity, research income, PhD studentships, and research infrastructure and capital spend;
- Building on our success, identifying clear targets and plans in order to achieve an accelerated rate of improvement in terms of the proportion of research outputs deemed to be internationally excellent and world-leading.