



University of the
Highlands and Islands
Oilthigh na Gàidhealtachd
agus nan Eilean

Research, Impact and Knowledge Exchange Strategic Plan 2018-2023



Research, Impact and Knowledge Exchange

Strategic Plan 2018-2023

Context

The University of the Highlands and Islands is an ambitious and outward facing organisation that will underpin all of its academic activities with scholarship and an approach characterised by critical reflection. It will produce a wide range of impactful world-class research outputs in its chosen research areas which, in particular, reflect the landscapes, seascapes, and the rich tapestry of cultures, and heritage within the Highlands and Islands of Scotland. The University will reach out to collaborate with other universities and organisations at national and international levels in the pursuit of this excellence in research, especially within its chosen areas of focus. The University will also increase activity in knowledge exchange for the benefit of the communities it serves and the region's economy, ensuring clear linkage of this to its stated research foci.

It follows that the University will focus its research and knowledge exchange activities in four main areas:

- » Marine and environmental science
- » Culture, creativity, heritage, language and history
- » Health
- » Landscape, economy, society and education

In the working out of this vision, the University recognises and proactively responds to the current dynamic and volatile external context for research, impact and knowledge exchange. In this way it will take full account of a number of significant external drivers: the potential impact of BREXIT; the creation of UK Research and Innovation; the increased importance of research impact and increased accountability of institutions for their performance, including in relation to equality and diversity; the reality of increased research intensification in some parts of the UK; the UK Industrial Strategy; the growing importance of internationalisation in research and the roll out of the University Innovation Fund.

Key indicators

The University will:

- **Increase its research income by at least 2% each year for the duration of this plan;**
- **Increase its knowledge exchange income by at least 2% each year for the duration of this plan;**
- **Recognising that REF 2021 is very different from REF 2014, secure an increased Grade Point Average for REF 2021 compared with REF 2014, and ensure that the University's submission increases by 25% as compared with REF 2014;**
- **Increase the number of PhD studentships year on year, funded through non-EU sources;**
- **Facilitate the development of a culture of scholarship for all staff, including the development of more research-teaching linkages.**

The University will deliver its vision particularly through its research centres and institutes, through the work of its knowledge exchange sector groups and especially through its four research clusters. The University will embed a culture of scholarship involving all of its staff working across its academic partnership. The University will also embed a revised knowledge exchange and research committee structure which will both respond to, and reflect the enhanced cohesion between its research and knowledge exchange activities.

Objectives

The delivery of the University's high-level vision is further exemplified through 8 specific objectives:

- 1. To secure an increased proportion of research output deemed to be internationally excellent and world-leading;**
- 2. To strengthen emerging areas of research;**
- 3. To develop an enhanced international profile for the University's research activities;**
- 4. To secure enhanced commercialisation of research and knowledge exchange output;**
- 5. To diversify research and knowledge exchange income;**
- 6. To secure greater cohesion in areas of research and knowledge exchange strength across the Highlands and Islands;**
- 7. To grow the University's graduate school, increasing the number of research students and increasing efficiency of underpinning academic business processes;**
- 8. Building on success to date, to continue to nurture a strong culture of scholarship and research.**

Delivery of the Strategic Plan Objectives

1. To secure an increased proportion of research output deemed to be internationally excellent and world leading.

This objective is core to the University's research work as it is a mark of its aspiration to the pursuit of excellence in research and associated impacts in society.

It is reflected in a systematic approach to preparations for Research Excellence Framework (2021). Key activities include: the creation of an annual REFPREP plan at Institutional level; devolution to identified leads for each Unit of Assessment (UoA) for ongoing action planning, together with accountability for these; and the establishment of targets for each UoA. Specific audits relating to REF will reveal the extent to which this objective is progressing.

A robust approach to the assessment of individual outputs, including the utilisation of critical friends will be key to the achievement of this objective.

2. To strengthen emerging areas of research.

The University has expanded its research output over recent years, and it is recognised that there are a number of new areas of research work currently emerging. The University will support the development of research in performing and visual arts and in education as recognised emerging areas of research strength.

3. To develop an enhanced international profile for the University's research activities.

Internationalisation is a cross-cutting theme of this strategy as research is by definition international; its focus is frequently on topics which transcend national boundaries. The University's work in marine science is a good example of this. The University will nurture and grow its international research work during the period of this plan.

In particular, it will seek ongoing opportunities to extract research findings derived from the highly distinctive landscapes, seascapes, environment, culture, context and heritage of the Highlands and Islands and endeavour to seek opportunities to apply these in international contexts. Examples may be the University's work in researching the provision of remote and rural health services, the interaction the University has with a uniquely dynamic aquaculture industry on the west coast of Scotland, and research carried about by the University's Institutes of Archaeology, Northern Studies and Agronomy.

The University will also engage with the Global Challenges Research Fund and will develop a separate strategy for this, as required by the Scottish Funding Council.

4. To secure enhanced commercialisation of research and knowledge exchange output.

The University has been involved in a number of ways over recent years in enhancing the impact of its research output, for example, through nearly 50 innovation voucher projects and some 12 Knowledge Transfer Projects (KTPs). The University will use this foundation to build further university/industry collaborations, for the benefit of the University, the region and beyond.

There is considerable further potential to secure enhanced commercialisation of impactful research at the University, whether this is through developing intellectual property rights for specific products/setting up spin-out companies, or whether this is on a 'fee for services basis'. In order to strengthen its position, the University will intensify the development of its plans for this work, utilising a full range of approaches, from innovation vouchers, to Knowledge Transfer Projects (KTPs), spin-out companies and the provision of commercial services.

5. To diversify research and knowledge exchange income.

The environment for research income is currently volatile and is likely to continue to be volatile for the duration of this strategic plan. It will be necessary for challenges relating to income diversification to be embraced, and a robust response to the threat to research income from the potential loss of significant European funds is especially important.

In the period of this strategic plan the University will:

- a) Establish realistic but ambitious income targets for research and knowledge exchange activity, including grant capture and drive ownership of these throughout the organisation, utilising the research clusters where appropriate;
- b) Seek to draw down funding for research and innovation through engaging with Growth Deals across the region;
- c) Engage relentlessly with major UK wide initiatives such as the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund;
- d) Enhance international research activity, including through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF), and through extending existing international activity in the University's major research areas;
- e) Develop a more systematic approach to environment scanning and bid writing in order to realise the opportunities that are available;
- f) Take every opportunity to continue to forge strategic relationships with the national bodies at Scottish and UK level, especially the UKRI. This opportunity will be taken in partnership with other regional entities within the Highlands and Islands, especially Highlands and Islands Enterprise;
- g) Consider opportunities which may become available through the Shared Prosperity Fund.

6. To secure greater cohesion in areas of research and knowledge exchange strength across the Highlands and Islands.

The University's stakeholders across the Highlands and Islands and beyond expect a cohesive and strategic approach to major research and knowledge exchange themes, even when researchers may be working in different areas of the Highlands and Islands, sometimes in relative isolation. It is important therefore that the University's 'shop window' clearly articulates its strengths to its stakeholders and sponsors. The University's four research clusters, broadly covering health, science, arts and humanities, and social sciences, have a key role in nurturing this cohesive approach.

During the period of this strategic plan, the University will identify specific disciplines where a more cohesive approach across the University's partnership would be advantageous. This will be achieved through working with the research clusters and knowledge exchange sector groups to commission a series of discipline level research and knowledge exchange strategies in areas such as energy, aquaculture, tourism and health.

This work will be underpinned by a strengthening of the inter-relationship between the University's centres and institutes, and research clusters, a significant purpose of which is to secure a fully joined-up narrative around key research areas for the University.

7. To grow the University's graduate school, increasing the number of research students and increasing efficiency of underpinning academic business processes.

The University has seen significant growth in the number of registered PhD students over recent years. Whilst these have largely been funded by European funds, it is important that the identification of new research funds leads to a continued expansion of the University's baseline number of research students – i.e. net of the ESIF uplift - as appropriate and possible. The University's Graduate School will, building on what has already been achieved, enhance further its approach to research training, rolling out strategies to create a vibrant community for all research students, including those working in remote locations.

In the early part of this strategic plan, the Graduate School will preside over the systematic and secure implementation of the transfer of responsibilities from the University of Aberdeen to the University of the Highlands and Islands, following the award of Research Degree Awarding Powers to the University in 2017.

It is also important, especially given further expansion of research student numbers, that the University's Graduate School activities continue to be efficient and effective. The University will hence increase the extent to which the business processes underpinning research students' experience are fully automated, from application to completion.

8. Building on success to date, to continue to nurture a strong culture of scholarship and research.

A strong research and scholarship culture is a fundamental element of any university, and is key to its success. For UHI it is vital to our standing as a university, and such a culture will be at the core of what the University does. A university should be informed by current research and have scholarship embedded throughout its activities. This research and knowledge exchange strategy will continue to be under-pinned by a research culture - defined as the values, expectations, organisational structures, policies and normative practices that facilitate the pursuit of research and scholarship as a collective commitment by our institution and key to our stated goals. As part of this, it is critical to recognise that active and engaged researchers are an important resource in terms of selling the University, and to ensure that the University takes a full and active part in developing the next generation of researchers.

Two particular foci for the development of a culture of research and scholarship relate to teaching-research-linkages and the iteration between this strategy and the Learning and Teaching Strategy.

The University's curriculum has developed rapidly over recent years, especially at undergraduate level, but also at postgraduate level. As the number of degrees has increased and the number of students studying at higher levels has also increased, the need to clarify expectations for a scholarly approach to teaching has also become more acute. The University has already instigated an approach to teaching-research linkages and this will be embedded further across the University.

The University will clearly articulate expectations around scholarly activity to underpin teaching at all levels and implement these in a systematic fashion. Much has already been achieved already in this regard, especially through the University's Learning and Teaching Academy, but there is more potential to link the University's Research and Knowledge Exchange Strategy to the University's Learning and Teaching Strategy.

Approved by the UHI Research and Knowledge Exchange Committee June 2018

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