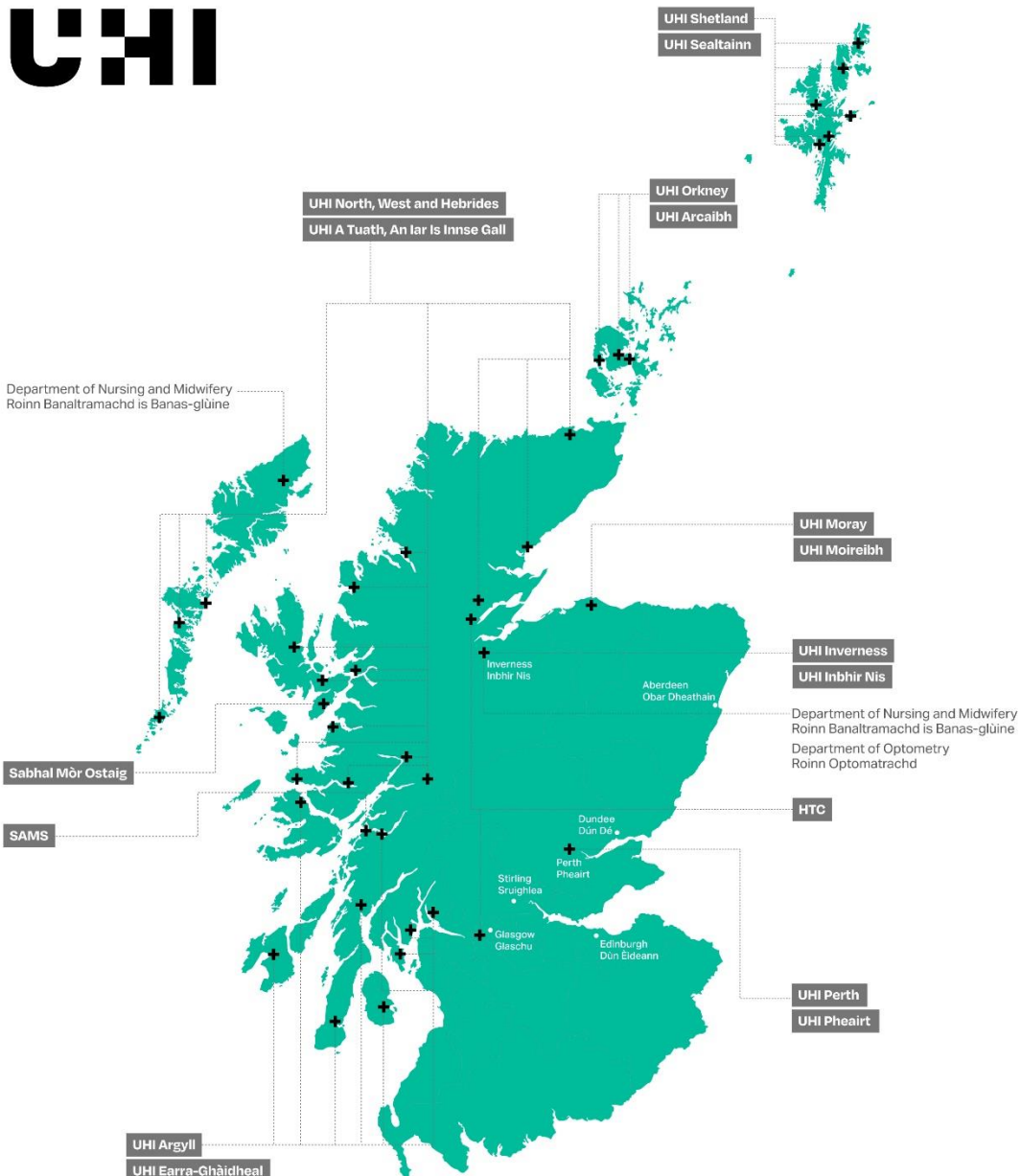


# HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS REGIONAL TERTIARY OUTCOME AGREEMENT 2023-24

## Introduction

The University of the Highlands and Islands is the only university based in our region, covering the Highlands and Islands, Perth and Kinross, and Moray. We are a tertiary institution with access to our further and higher education study and research opportunities through a distinctive educational partnership of colleges and research institutions. Our partnership spans nine local authorities, two enterprise regions and seven health boards. We have strong links with employers, and other institutions, locally, regionally, nationally and globally. Our regional tertiary partnership:



As the only university based in our region, we are intensely aware of our responsibilities to enhance the status of Gaelic. Our fourth Gaelic Language Plan, 2023-2026, has now been approved and will be launched 7 November 2023. The plan contains our continuing commitments to enhance the Gaelic services we provide for staff, students and the public.

UHI has a new strategic plan launched in summer 2023 which sets out our vision and commitments to 2030. The plan was a result of a cross-partnership development and consultation process including leadership and governance committees and has been shared with staff and stakeholders. The plan sets out our commitments under five themes - teaching, learning and student support; research and innovation impact; enterprise and growth; environmental sustainability; and operational excellence; focused on our vision:

To become:

- + A destination of choice for learners responding to the regional needs of our communities, business and industry and developing our national and global positioning in curriculum and research areas of strength.
- + A partner of choice for regional employers and stakeholders and more widely through expanding relevant national and global collaborations.
- + An employer of choice where people are valued, supported and celebrated as one of our greatest assets.

And the commitment that the UHI partnership will think, plan and act as one in delivering on our mission and vision, underpinned by operational excellence.

We have already reported to SFC evidence of disproportionate impacts on UHI and our region during the pandemic and Brexit, the latter not only resulting in reduced EU students but affecting the job market due to our region's reliance in EU workers.

In Further Education, UHI has seen strong recovery and growth in 2022-23, driven by significantly increased demand for part-time and work-based delivery models as our region's key sectors continued to recover. This had been expected to continue into 2023-24, with a strong evidence base of demand. However, restrictions in the funding available for FE provision across the sector will instead constrain UHI's ability to continue to meet this growth in demand. The flat-cash funding settlement within the context of continued increased costs to deliver, means that UHI has been required to plan for a reduced level of credit delivery in 2023-24.

We are continuing to liaise closely with SFC during this time with a view to ensuring that our region's needs can be met. This will include a particular focus on mitigating the challenges of delivery and protecting the pipeline of schools provision in our rural and remote areas, ensuring we can continue to respond to the significant growth in demand and labour market challenges across key sectors such as construction, engineering, healthcare, and putting in place the necessary provision and capacity to meet new and emerging skills needs such as in the renewable energy sector.

Higher education has remained more challenging, however in 2023-24 we have started to see some welcome recovery in applications numbers. This will of course take time to show in the overall FTE position as lower intakes over the last two years, mainly in full-time study, work through courses and progression routes. UHI has been particularly affected given our widening access and regional mission; with our higher reliance on mature students at a time of a cost-of-living crisis and availability of employment; the shift towards higher tariff universities when additional places were put into the system; and impacts on our FE and HN pipelines over the last few years.

## Priority 1: Fair access and transitions

Widening access and progression is built into our tertiary curriculum offer. Our integrated learning pathways, using academic, vocational and work-based routes, maximise opportunity for all. In 2023-24, to support access, we will focus on development of our admissions processes and systems, including a review of direct application forms and support to improve completion; a new HE offer-making strategy; and applicant communication plans to support engagement and conversion.

### 1.1 COWA 2026 and 2030 and National Schools Programmes and Senior Phase

UHI is in the unique position of being able to offer a wide range of entry points and progression pathways for learners. This gives us the flexibility to offer fair access at the right time to the right level of study for all, including those in the most deprived areas and from under-represented backgrounds. We do not set unnecessarily high barriers to entry with our published entry requirements already set at the minimum required for successful completion.

We perform well in recruiting from the most deprived areas in comparison to the population within our region where we recruit most of our students. We target relevant postcodes in marketing material distribution and promote our contextual admissions indicator. In supporting access to HE, our increased focus on targeted activities promoting articulation from other Scottish Colleges is also a strategy for increasing recruitment from the most deprived areas outside our region. Progression to HE is also supported through our engagement with the National Schools programme including a longstanding partnership with ASPIRENorth and more recently developed links with LEAPS.

For FE, in 2023-24, we expected to deliver a similar proportion of overall credits to senior phase pupils across the region, albeit with lower enrolments in real terms owing to the overall flat-cash funding settlement and 10% reduction in credit threshold. Delivery of work-based and vocational senior phase programmes, including in construction, engineering, care, hospitality and early years provision, will continue to be prioritised, including a further increase in the number of level 4 and 5 Foundation Apprenticeships.

As part of ensuring fair access for young people in rural and remote areas, developing and protecting a pipeline of school provision leading into senior phase, further and higher education remains a priority for UHI and local partners, particularly in relation to STEM subjects. This will be crucial in ensuring the skills pathways for young people that align to the region's current and future labour market challenges in key sectors such as energy, healthcare, life-sciences, marine and land-based industries.

In recognition of our significant proportion of mature entrants, our RPL procedures are a key element of fair and widening access as is our work with SWAP which we review annually to ensure all possible progression pathways are available and promoted to their students. We have added 30 new links to our agreement in 2023-24.

### 1.2 Care-experienced and other under-represented groups

The UHI-wide priority groups forum develops and shares good practice for support, recruitment and retention in vulnerable groups including care experienced students, student carers and estranged students. Care-experience continues to be one of our HE admissions contextual indicators and we commit to offering a place to care-experience applicants who meet the minimum requirements of the programme. UHI supports and promotes the national care experienced week when we run an anonymised survey seeks views from care-experience students at all levels to improve our service.

## Priority 2: Quality learning and teaching

### 2.1 High quality experience

Our new 2030 strategic plan sets out our aspiration to be known for our creative, student centred and innovative learning and teaching delivered through a modern and digitally enabled curriculum, in an inclusive and stimulating environment regardless of study mode, level, or location. Our commitment to an exceptional student learning experience is expressed in our Learning and Teaching Enhancement strategy (LTES). 2023-24 is the second year of the current strategy. The LTES implementation plan identifies objectives throughout the plan period which will embed the strategy and associated values across UHI, including developing education about and for sustainability within our curricula.

To support the LTES, the university offers a rich range of professional development and recognition opportunities for colleagues to share and develop practice. With a focus this year on digitally enabled learning, teaching and assessment and evidence-based approaches to education. This includes a symposium on Artificial Intelligence (AI) in learning and teaching in October 2023. Further enhancement initiatives will be progressed this year in learning analytics, open educational practices, curriculum design and development, and AI.

### 2.2 Supporting employability - employer links and career development.

Also in our 2030 strategic plan is a commitment to student employability, with a specific ambition that all full-time higher education students will have a professional and/or work-based experience to prepare them for their next steps. We are also supporting career development through access for all students and graduates to our new online platform, Handshake, and employer engagement in the curriculum. Examples include:

The [UHI Employer Mentoring Programme](#) run by the Careers and Employability Centre which has been designed to provide students with the opportunity to access insights, advice, and support, from professionals working across a range of sectors. The programme is open to students from any campus and any subject area, in their 3rd or 4th year of study. Students and mentors shape their relationship and what they want to discuss. Feedback from students and mentors has been very positive.

The Future Creative programme is designed to directly connect creative, heritage and digital students and businesses with professional networks and opportunities in the region. This is delivered exclusively to UHI students through a partnership with Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE), XpoNorth Digital Programme, the UHI Career Centre and including Soluble Fish Productions led by Jason Lust, one of the founders of management and production company Circle of Confusion responsible for the Matrix Trilogy and the Walking Dead.

The initiative will help creative talent in the region to hone their skills while better preparing them for a career in the film and TV industry. Since launching last year, new businesses have been started by students, discussions with production companies for film rights have taken place and work placements in the TV and film industry in the region have been developed. The second intake this year will involve a year-long screen-production programme with Soluble Fish Productions, Jason Lust will deliver the programme in person and will teach a course at UHI to help pass on some of the wisdom he has garnered over the years and break down barriers for the north's brightest talent.

## 2.3 Supporting student experience.

The UHI Hardship Group, Student Mental health Group and Student Support Group are continuing their focus on supporting students with the cost-of-living crisis. This is a significant concern for our students impacting decisions to embark on their studies and affecting their ability to complete. We are looking at the best ways to use discretionary funds to support those most in need and using our fundraising networks to increase donations and scholarship opportunities. Through local initiatives, where each partner determines what is most appropriate based on their students and geographical location, we have been able to respond to local needs, with practical support from providing breakfast clubs and warm spaces on campus to working with local foodbanks.

Supporting more broadly student mental health and wellbeing remains a priority for UHI. [Our services](#) are designed to ensure that all students, regardless of their circumstance or location, can access mental health and counselling resources and support. This includes proactive support for care experienced students, and other vulnerable groups to help them achieve their academic outcomes given the unique issues they may be facing. Extensive work has also been done to review information for staff in our mental health conditions toolkit <https://staffresources.uhi.ac.uk/mhc/>

To support students in the initial stages of their study with us and in response to a recommendation in our last ELIR report, we have conducted a review of the role of induction and freshers' events in building the student community. The review identified and showcased induction activities to support sharing of good practice, with various models reflecting our different study modes and subjects. Evidence of effectiveness was also taken from the partnership wide, early student experience survey, which indicated positive experiences of inductions. However, awareness of freshers' activities was low and further work on options for enhancement in building student communities will focus on these opportunities this year.

During the period of the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis, we have seen an impact on our retention. To support students to continue with their studies and in response to another ELIR recommendation, we are currently focusing on a strategic approach to managing retention including further development of learning analytics functionality in the virtual learning environment. The focus is on identifying students and cohorts who may benefit from further support to engage in their studies and identifying 'stress points' in the design of learning and teaching, and programmes of study where there may be an increased risk of disengagement or unintentional barriers to effective engagement. While the focus is on higher education it is anticipated that outcomes and recommendations will contribute to broader tertiary retention discussions.

## 2.4 Student participation and engagement

The UHI/HISA Student Partnership Agreement sets out how students and staff work together to improve the student experience. We were recently named runner-up in the 'established initiative in partnership' award at the sparqs annual student engagement awards.

Students are represented in all relevant university and academic partner committees. A student voice rep from each class attends course committees to ensure engagement with student views and input. Student representatives are trained and supported in those roles. Wider engagement with the student body is done through focus groups and consultation events when any major change is planned, for example to curriculum. For 2023-24, we are focusing on providing greater level of detail to students on survey outcomes, including the NSS and PTES.

### Priority 3: Coherent provision

The UHI 2030 strategic plan includes our commitment to Increasing our reputation and reach through a distinctive curriculum and partnerships with business and industry. With a specific commitment to acting as an anchor institution in our regions to deliver regeneration and high-quality jobs; global trade and investment; and thriving and sustainable communities. To support this and delivery of a more coherent provision, UHI recently reviewed our academic structures creating two new faculties with a tertiary focus. The new faculties have plans to enhance our strategic and operational approaches to decision making in curriculum planning and revisions. This includes:

- Enhanced engagement with stakeholders and data/intelligence in ensuring new curricula are as closely aligned to business needs as possible in both content and delivery form.
- Ensuring the contemporary relevance of existing curricula within the reapproval process, including ensuring programme titles accurately reflect changes in the business and student market.

In addition, we will be seeking to plot a new strategic curricula identity that ensures there is a work-based component to all programmes. This may vary in size, form and content but will ensure that this enhances both student insight and experience into the relevant working world and increases the work-ready status of our students.

We have recognised the evidence base supporting design and innovation as key drivers of economic growth. We have reviewed the role of enhanced creativity and design in the arts and studies that now point to the integration of the arts and humanities with STEM as an integrated approach to enhance critical and innovative thinking, creativity and problem solving. This STEAM approach, now evident in a range of other forward-looking universities, will drive an operational plan for enhanced curricula, as articulated in our 2030 strategic vision.

#### 3.1 Examples of our partnership approach to coherent tertiary provision planning and delivery

##### *STEM, net zero and green economy:*

There is a significant economic opportunity for our region in energy transition, particularly floating offshore wind developments and the skills response, with multiple projects awarded through Scotwind leasing. UHI has built relationships with numerous developers, including a UHI offshore wind skills workshop to consider the tertiary opportunities to support these projects. As a result, UHI secured funding from offshore wind project developers to expand our STEM outreach programme over a three-year period. The funding enabled us to recruit ten coordinators, based at campuses across the UHI partnership, to promote careers in STEM to primary school children across the north of Scotland. The programme will also deliver materials and training to teachers across our operating area to build their confidence and knowledge in subjects where they may have no familiarity.

The university is also a partner in the Inverness and Cromarty Firth Green Freeport development which aims to bring up to 10,000 new jobs in the renewables sector to the area over the next 20 years. UHI are leading or are members of four work packages working on outline business cases. Alongside this, the UHI Net-Zero Hub has been approved with some UIF funding and links to our Sustainability Strategy. For all these developments we continue to work with key stakeholders such as the Energy Skills Partnership, SDS and HIE in scaling up for the regions renewable energy skills needs.

Net-zero centred work-based learning packages, including green construction and advanced manufacturing, delivered to each of the three main island groups over the next ten years, will be developed as part of the Islands Growth Deal TalEntEd programme.

Work is continuing on MAATIC (Moray Aerospace Advanced Technology and Innovation Campus) which is a £30m project within the Moray Growth Deal. This includes a formal partnership with Boeing with the project's full business case submitted to the UK and Scottish Governments in October 2023.

Development of our advanced manufacturing offer continues through the Advanced Manufacturing Centre in West Highland and working with HIE in Moray on the Manufacturing Innovation Centre.

UHI Moray secured £210,000 to deliver a year-long project from March 2023 focused on UHI's role in supporting the Green Transition and the growth of a sustainable green economy. The principal focus of the project is to address skills and knowledge gaps and supply chain bottlenecks. This includes skills audit and future needs analysis; curriculum review and development; infrastructure development to support delivery of new programmes; and skills and academic enterprise to support emerging businesses. The Moray Hydrogen steering group is working to position UHI as a lead partner in a larger consortium bid for future funding.

Research within our marine, aquaculture and land-based sectors, including the Seaweed Academy at SAMS, a new Centre for Sustainable Seafood in Shetland, and peatland restoration work at the Environmental Research Institute in Thurso. A further development is the university taking the lead on the Shellvolution project in the Shetland which, working with the shellfish industry, hopes to double production over the next decade.

Lifesciences and working with the NHS:

Life Sciences Innovation Centre, located in Inverness opened in March 2023 and forms part of the Inverness and Highland City-Region Deal. This facility, operated in partnership with HIE, is supporting the university to increase research and knowledge exchange and provide greater support to the region's life science sector, including incubation space for SMEs.

We have held a series of workshops and collaborative meetings with NHS Highland focussed on developing a more formal strategic collaboration and aligning the educational, training and evaluation needs for health provision in the region. This is feeding into more routine engagement to plan long term training needs that may be unique to more remote and rural provision. In 2023-4 we will continue to develop a longer-term plan for interprofessional education, and expansion to support training of AHPs, doctors, and social workers. We will also develop our revised optometry programme into a masters programme with integrated prescribing, and further expand our new and unique rural advanced practice programme.

## Priority 4: Work-based learning and teaching

For Foundation Apprenticeships (FA), following a drop in recruitment during the pandemic hit years, 2023-24 is expected to see continued recovery in enrolment numbers as this provision take time to re-establish within the school senior phase. This is expected despite the overall reduction in planned FE credit delivery, driven by a shift from existing programmes in some parts of the region to the level 4 and 5 frameworks in some subject areas, particularly construction. UHI will continue to work closely with SFC and SDS during this time in the transition and integration of funding and reporting arrangements for this provision.

Modern Apprenticeships (MA) will continue to be a significant proportion of overall college provision in 2023-24, with high industry demand expected, particularly in key sectors such as construction, engineering and healthcare within the context of high levels of employment and labour market challenges. Similarly to 2022-23, limited overall availability of Scottish Government funding for apprenticeships is expected to result in another year of unmet employer demand, with UHI forecasting that funded places will meet around 65-75% of our potential employer demand across our region.

Liaison with key stakeholders such as Energy Skills Partnership, Skills Development Scotland, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, renewable energy developers and businesses will also continue throughout 2023-24. We are working in partnership to assess and respond to the significant increase in workforce skills demands in the energy sector across our region, with apprenticeships expected to play a significant role. UHI will continue to liaise with SFC during this time to ensure the strong evidence of demand for work-based skills can be met.

For Graduate Apprenticeships (GA), 2023-24 will see the introduction of three new programmes across UHI – Construction and Built Environment, Business Management and Software Development. This is in addition to existing Civil Engineering and Early Learning and Childcare programmes as our provision in this area continues to expand in response to the changing demand for workbased HE delivery models in these subject areas. Four of these programmes are expected to enrol students in 2023-24 (Software Development is recruiting for 2024-25) totalling over 120 enrolments, almost half of which will be within our ground-breaking BA Early Learning and Childcare programme.

During 2023-24, UHI will continue to work in partnership with our established network of employers and industry partners across the region to ensure our provision aligns to current and future workforce needs. This will include through UHI academic partner employer engagement and business solution teams, and our curriculum development and advisory forums, as well as through continued engagement in regional economic planning, community planning and local employability partnerships across our local authority areas. A significant aspect of this engagement will include assessment and response to current and future work-based, upskilling and reskilling requirements as part of our region's youth pipeline and talent attraction strategies to ensure future workforce demands can be met.



## Priority 5: Net zero and environmental sustainability response

UHI launched and published a new Sustainability Strategy 2023-30 and new policy in September 2023, [Policies and regulations - Our climate commitment \(uhi.ac.uk\)](https://uhi.ac.uk/policies-and-regulations-our-climate-commitment)

It is acknowledged that our baseline position across the whole sustainability agenda is not where we would like it to be in 2023. This is now an area that is consciously being addressed at speed with close alignment to the UHI 2030 Strategic Plan which includes a priority theme on sustainability.

The approach taken to producing the new sustainability strategy involved representation from across the partnership. The strategy scope was adjusted to be more aligned with a wider sustainability focus rather than heavily on net zero and importantly more emphasis was placed on risk, adaptation and climate resilience.

As such the strategy takes a different line to many, it is not one dimensionally focused on net zero. It places emphasis and focus on achieving energy security as a means of achieving net zero. This is complemented by UHI committing to becoming a 'One Planet' institution by 2040 using the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a suite of measures (or by using an accepted ecological foot printing methodology).

One important objective is to accurately baseline the institutions' emissions in readiness for the eventual introduction of a carbon budget and alignment with financial planning. Our PBCCD submissions, while at a starting point, are incomplete and will need to become more accurate, this is acknowledged. Once introduced a carbon budget is likely to result in annual emissions reductions in the range of 15-20% year on year to 2040.

Post launch of the strategy, a new implementation group is being created which will drive forward action and change. This will include our Green Champions Network of staff and students and HISA.

The new strategy and policy are both products of not only legislation and duties, but a reaction to the climate and ecological emergencies facing students, communities and the natural world. The scope of the strategy, as can be seen, is a holistic one that will also develop and mature over time.

In our 2030 strategic plan we have committed to being champions for rural and island sustainable communities and taking a leading role in supporting environmentally sustainable economic development in fragile rural systems across our regions, protecting some of the most important and globally significant ecosystems. Our contribution to wider themes across the environmental sustainability agenda and decarbonisation of the economy will come through areas of recognised curriculum and research strength. Further information can be found in the sections around coherent provision and University Innovation Fund.

## Priority 6: High quality research and innovation

### 6.1 Effective use of SFC core research grants in 2023-24

The Research Excellence Grant (REG) is a crucial and significant component of the research income that is received by UHI, and it is based on the high-quality submission that was made to the 2021 REF. By agreement within UHI, the main share of REG is distributed on a semi-formulaic way across the partnership, with an allocation to provide central resources and personnel to support research activities. An example of this is our new and comprehensive suite of training and development opportunities for research active (and would-be research active) staff launched in 2023-24. Uptake of places for training has already been impressive, and the programme aims to provide relevant opportunities for staff across all career stages. The funding resource devolved to partners and research areas is intended to provide support for staffing (including contributions to salary costs) and some modest capital investment to enable the core levels of research to be undertaken. This is in addition to income derived from various forms of research income generation, including UIF and competitively won grants. It is worth noting that the environment for securing such grant income is challenging, which has been increasingly the case since Brexit, and has had a particularly significant impact on UHI. Nevertheless, creative engagement with the opportunities that are available has seen our income rise, and the range of sources of that income also broaden, which has facilitated a range of project-based research to be undertaken. Recently, we were delighted to learn that the UK will now be able to participate fully again in Horizon Europe projects, and we intend to develop a number of links to take advantage of this. We also plan to engage fully and creatively with Scotland's 'National Innovation Strategy' and efforts are already underway to position the university to secure helpful leadership and partnership roles in the new environment, as the details of funding streams available become clear over the course of the coming year.

The Research Postgraduate Grant (RPG) is used in a number of ways at UHI, not least to fund core staff within the university's graduate school team and support funding of senior leadership in this area - Dean of Research and Knowledge Exchange - who currently leads the UHI Graduate School and is a member of the SFC's Advisory Group on Supporting Scotland's Postgraduate Researchers. In addition, the funding supports several UHI-funded PhD studentships through an annual competition for funding that awards up to four new studentships each year. Further contributions from the grant are made in support of UHI's commitment to its share of funding for studentships secured from the Scottish Graduate School for Arts and Humanities and the SUPER DTP, of which the university is a member. It is noteworthy that from 2024-25, we will also be eligible for studentship funding under the Scottish Graduate School for Social Sciences, of which we are now a formal partner following the recent successful recommissioning bid. In addition, we make a range of training and development opportunities available to our PGR students and provide an element of hardship funding support, as well as contributions to students for conference attendance and other relevant aspects of support for their general care and wellbeing, as part of the excellent PGR student experience that we provide.

### 6.2 Supporting sustainability and future research excellence.

UHI remains committed to discharging our responsibilities effectively in research development and the embedding and growth of a strong and vibrant research culture across the university. This requires ever more careful allocation of resource and prioritising activities to ensure the best possible return on investment.

As mentioned above, our new comprehensive training and development programme, which resulted from a survey of staff needs in 2022-23, is moving into the first full year of operation. The importance of financial sustainability and growth, as well as research excellence has informed the range of training opportunities in the programme. There is a focus on income generation and ways to ensure that the university is better placed to secure larger scale grants, as well as continuing to increase our success in more modest 'starter level' grants, through things like Innovation Vouchers and KTPs. The university was successful in the Scottish KTP awards in a number of categories in 2022-23, and we plan to build on that success through the formation of a new sector group, funded by our increased UIF resources, focusing on our natural advantages in the social sciences areas, under the title Land and Communities. We are also holding proactive strategy sessions, including our research forum event on 30 September 2023, where we considered in detail Scotland's Innovation Strategy document. We intend to build our connections and activities in external engagement and to grow our research-related partnerships. We are already highly successful in KE, but we have also recently decided to become signatories to the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement's Manifesto for Public Engagement and then to apply for Engage Watermark Award at an appropriate stage. In addition, we are members of the relatively new Scotland-wide ECR Network funded by the Wellcome Trust, which was initiated in 2022-23. We also provide funding to help cover some of the costs of our staff when attending international conferences, with the express intention of building effective research collaborations and influence.

### 6.3 Enabling an excellent research environment and positive cultures.

The university held the latest in its biennial staff/student research conferences in Elgin in January 2023. This marked the first time since Covid-19 that the whole research community (staff and students) had been able to gather in person (while continuing to allow wider engagement through VC, in a hybrid event). This was an exceptional event, and it marked a reinvigoration of the excellent research culture that has been actively built-up across UHI over the 12 years that these events have run. In 2023-24, we will be holding a PGR student conference and development event in Orkney, for attendance by students and supervisors. The following year, we will hold another joint conference, and thereby begin the biennial cycle of events again.

As noted above, the university is actively involved in public engagement activity and events at various levels, and this includes a link with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, along with Highlands and Islands Enterprise, in their North and West programme. The programme is focussing on a range of highly topical discussions, talks, and presentations throughout the region. We hold public lecture events, some associated with staff delivering their inaugural professorial lectures to a public audience, and we have a host of conferences, workshops and seminars underway in our research clusters and academic areas across the year. These are all seeking to be broadly engaging and participative, helping us to embed UHI more fully into the life and activities of the communities in which we live and serve.

Our research is always undertaken with full ethical approval and with regard to the highest propriety in terms of quality, range, methodology and reproducibility. This is aided by our investment in structures and staffing who have as part of their core responsibilities the development and empowerment of our research active staff. Within a distributed, tertiary institution, action needs to be taken to ensure that staff who are interested in research are enabled to do so, while maintaining a balance of activities across the functions we perform. Therefore, the way we do things may differ in some ways from more traditional institutions, but we believe this creates a vibrant and innovative approach that is healthy and engaging. For example, we recently launched a comprehensive new process and arrangement for recognition of staff contributions that can lead to associate professor and professor titles, designed and delivered by the Dean of Research and Knowledge Exchange. It is anticipated that this

framework will help enable the HR departments across the partnership to develop a similar framework and process that can help establish clearer pathways for career development and more consistency of processes and approaches.

#### 6.4 Concordats

Our position on research integrity and the annual statement required by the concordat is published in the UHI website: [Research Policy and Ethics - Research Integrity \(uhi.ac.uk\)](https://www.uhi.ac.uk/research-policy-and-ethics-research-integrity).

As highlighted, the university has recently agreed to become a signatory to the National Coordinating Centre for Public Engagement's Manifesto for Public Engagement. We are engaged in a number of ways in the active development of our ECR staff, not least through the ECR Network and the support of UHI's own research clusters. However, while we seek to adhere to the principles of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, we are not yet in a position to become formal signatories due to the structure and tertiary nature of the university. This added complexity for UHI is in respect to line management of research active staff and would-be research active staff.

We recognise the importance of the researcher development concordat and have secured a number of arrangements in regard to the three overarching principles. For the environment and culture principle, we have well established fora for researchers and research students, including our annual researcher forum and a biennial staff and student research conference. We have appointed a Head of Research Culture and Environment whose role is focused on developing the research environment across the UHI partnership. There is regular critical reflection on our research environment as we consider data related to PRES, ELIR and REF outcomes, and our research clusters report regularly to the research and knowledge exchange committee. On employment, we have an established route to professor and associate professor through our academic titles review board, and some individual partners, notably SAMS have bespoke progression arrangements. We have a system of professional development for research staff which has been enhanced from 2022-23 onwards and includes a comprehensive suite of staff development opportunities, as well as our staff mentoring scheme. Research training for students is delivered at individual discipline level, but also through the university's graduate school. There is further work to do to take forward the concordat principles and a comprehensive action plan has been developed which will be revisited in 2023-24. A key element of this is the desirability of ensuring a more consistent approach to researcher career development across our diverse academic partnership.

Work is also currently being undertaken in the build-up to the next REF to develop a suitable proxy for a full university staff return to HESA. This work is in partnership with Oxford and Cambridge Universities, institutions that also are not currently able to provide full HESA staff submissions due to their own structural configurations. It is hoped and expected that an approach to this that is acceptable to all parties, including the SFC, will be available soon, and the university welcomes SFC's active engagement with us in this challenging process. It should be noted that an action plan has been developed to help progress the university's ability to become signatories to the Concordat, which will be prioritised following the conclusion of the current executive office restructure activities.

## Priority 7: University Innovation Fund (UIF)

In 2023-24, UHI will continue to use the University Innovation Fund in our sector-focused approach but with increased emphasis on activities aimed at supporting local, regional and national recovery from the pandemic, as well as adjusting to the significant impact on UHI of reduced access to European structural funds.

The UIF uplift will be used to support the delivery of key strategic drivers in the Scottish Government's Innovation Strategy as well as enhancing the entrepreneurial activities across the sector groups and developing a new sectoral group in Land and Communities. Specifically:

- A new sectoral group - UHI has significant expertise in topics and disciplines relating to land and communities in the Highlands and Islands. This sector group will bring together those interested in researching, teaching and learning, and innovating in this area. Working collaboratively with external partners (including community organisations, businesses and other stakeholders) the group will ensure the relevance and impact of these activities. Our aim is to enhance the university's role in driving land reform and the sustainable development of communities throughout the region by sharing our knowledge, skills and passion.
- Supporting the new Net Zero Hub - the aim of the UHI Net Zero Hub is to support integration and development of climate change, decarbonisation and sustainability capabilities across the themes of tertiary education, research, enterprise and engagement.
- Launch of a new student enterprise competition - to support students at an early stage of development by providing training and a small pot of funding to allow them to invest in a business idea and explore making a full Converge application for additional funding and support. Through the competition, participants will develop enterprising skills, explore and define ideas, and will be introduced to Scotland's start-up ecosystem with a purposeful focus on Converge.
- Entrepreneurship project: developing a new mid-career researchers programme, 'Making it Happen Day' and other entrepreneurial training programmes.
- Support Knowledge Exchange projects within the four clusters: Marine, Environmental Science and Engineering; Society, Identity, Landscape and Knowledge; Health; and Humanities and Arts.

### 7.1 Engagement

Nationally, there has been significant change in the landscape, including the ongoing review of UIF, with the publication of the Entrepreneurial Campus and the Scottish Government's National Strategy for Economic Transformation and Innovation Strategy. We will continue to work closely with colleagues in the Research and Commercialisation Director's Group (RCDG) and wider stakeholders to define the next phase of our collaborative initiatives. UHI will continue to engage with the 'Modern Universities' group to overcome common challenges and identify unique opportunities.

In the UHI region, for each of the SFC UIF priority outcomes, UHI will maintain and expand our operational knowledge exchange network. This operates through different sectoral groupings, each theme has a named champion who guides activities including interaction with other HEIs, local companies and organisations, local authorities, Highlands and Islands Enterprise, and the Scottish and UK Innovation/KE landscape. As with previous years, some initiatives will be funded primarily from the Outcome Grant element of UIF, these are focused on key sectors for the Highlands and Islands region. These are aquaculture, energy, and health (Active Health and Well-being and the Scottish Rural Health Hub). The UHI entrepreneurship development project will also be funded from the Outcome Grant. Additional support through core Platform Grant has also been employed to develop KE activities in the creative economy, tourism, water quality innovation and our new land and communities' sectoral group.

Each of the UIF funded projects have their own internal targets and key performance indicators aligned with SFC's seven desired priority outcomes, with priority given to outcome one to four. These projects aim to provide sectoral hubs with business development and coordination resources as well as funding for business engagement activities such as events, promotions, meetings, and a challenge/seed corn fund. These targets and KPIs also demonstrate commitment to helping Scotland achieve its green recovery ambitions, a well-being economy and just transition to a net zero carbon society.

## 7.2 UIF Priority Outcomes

**Outcome one:** *Demand stimulation: Increase the demand and quality of engagement from businesses and the public sector for university services.*

UHI has committed to a three-year tripartite partnership with the Royal Society of Edinburgh and Highlands and Islands Enterprise to co-develop and co-deliver a series of regional engagement activities across our network, working with schools, communities, and businesses to promote university activity. The regional activity will support Outcome 1 in delivering high quality engagement for university services.

Institutionally, and through participation in RCDG, we will actively engage with Interface as they evolve their delivery model. Interface have indicated that they will move away from a focus on transactional activity towards supporting more strategic engagement between academia and industry. This has potential to increase the demand and quality of engagement from businesses and the public sector for university services, and we are keen to exploit this opportunity with our colleagues in Interface.

We will encourage academic engagement with the funding opportunities made available by Interface, including Innovation Vouchers (Student Placement, Standard and Advanced), Inward Investment Catalyst Fund, and Healthier Products for Innovation Fund for Scotland, and explore more strategic initiatives when opportunities arise.

The indication is that the next generation Innovation Centres (as 'infrastructure investments') will be strategically closer to HEIs, which will also have the potential to increase engagement from businesses and the public sector. UHI will actively engage with Innovation Centres to influence more coherent relationships during academic year 2023-24.

**Outcome two.** *Simplification/Commercialisation - Simplify business access to the knowledge and expertise in Scottish universities.*

For UHI, ensuring greater engagement with business is supported through increased outreach activity by KE/Innovation staff working closely with sectoral skills assessment staff to promote easier access to university research expertise.

For example, the UHI Creative Economy KE group, are planning to pilot an 'Adopt a Business' programme across the region during 2023-24. This follows on from the success of the scheme for the tourism sector that was led by Interface and which the UHI Tourism KE sector group was actively engaged.

UHI welcomed the formation of an IP Commercialisation Peer Network. This peer network will influence positive change in our institutional policies and procedures, simplifying business access to knowledge and expertise in our institution.

Our engagement in 2023-24 will focus on:

- Sharing resources, and collaborative solutions to increase academic engagement.
- Sector-specific approaches to commercialisation, including in creative industries and the social sciences.
- Collaborative approaches to partnering events and other international opportunities.
- Collaborative response to national strategies, including Scottish Government's Innovation Strategy and National Strategy for Economic Transformation.

We also welcome the opportunity to inform the detail and implementation of a new research commercialisation framework as stated in Scotland's National Innovation Strategy and will work collaborative with colleagues on this through RCDG.

At an institutional level, the UHI Research Forum event on held on 30 September included a number of important matters relating to KE, including some further discussion and planning for our institutional engagement with the National Innovation Strategy.

We are developing a plan to extend our commercial activity that accords with the National Innovation Strategy and our priorities associated with our geography and mission. In addition to innovation vouchers and KTPs, we are exploring new forms of entrepreneurial engagement with various partners across our region and extending promotion of student-based entrepreneurialism, including more direct engagement with staff and doctoral (and Masters by Research) students, to support translating research-based innovations and findings into commercial opportunities.

**Outcome three.** *Simplification/greater Innovation - Make strategic use of sectoral knowledge to promote greater innovation in the economy.*

Plans for greater innovation during 2023-24, include the continued engagement with the regional lead for Innovate UK in Scotland, to influence policy and increase opportunity for Scottish businesses.

The university welcomes the increased investment from Innovate UK in the KTP programme, and in 2023-24 we hope to grow our KTP portfolios, increasing the number of collaborative projects with local SMEs and larger businesses to facilitate greater innovation.

It is also our intention to deliver KTP information workshops in the university in combination with a series of events and IP audits aimed at changing the university culture around intellectual property and research commercialisation through greater awareness of opportunities.

In 2023-24, we will continue to collaborate with other Scottish HEIs on mission-led funding through the Challenge Fund Network. The network meets on a regular basis to enable peer-to-peer support, initiate new collaborations, engage with funders, and facilitate horizon scanning for the next big opportunities. On 6 September 2023, the Challenge Fund Network held a collaborative workshop with a focus on R&D funding (UKRI or other), specifically exploring the role of Innovation Centres in capacity building between researchers and industry; influencing funders; and developing competitive collaborative bids.

At an institutional level, the UHI Water Hub helped to facilitate a collaboration between Sustainable Thinking Scotland CIC and UHI. This resulted in researchers from UHI North Highland's Environmental Research Institute (ERI) and University of Strathclyde to test biochar production from wood waste and investigate its potential use in nutrient removal. A Scottish Funding Council Innovation Voucher was used to fund the project with UHI, while a consultancy project with the University of Strathclyde supported other developments. The Innovation Voucher assisted with finding other funding opportunities for Sustainable Thinking Scotland CIC

as well as securing a £190K investment from Firstport and Social Enterprise Scotland's Catalyst Fund to bring their technology to market. Sustainable Thinking Scotland's determination and hard work is paying off as they won the Innovation of the Year Award at the Scottish Knowledge Exchange Awards 2023. [Media - News - Waste wood innovation picks up national prize \(uhi.ac.uk\). Sustainable Thinking Scotland Community Interest Company | Interface Online \(interface-online.org.uk\)](#)

**Outcome four. Entrepreneurialism** - *Make a significant and positive change in the way entrepreneurial opportunities are promoted and delivered to students, HEI staff, and businesses.*

We plan to continue to play an active role in the Enterprise Support Group (ESG), a formal subgroup of RCDG that meets to share best practice, deliver collaborative initiatives, and engage with the latest strategy and policy from Scottish and UK governments.

In 2023-24, we will continue to engage with SFC and Scottish Government to support the key strategic drivers in the Scottish Government's Innovation Strategy and Entrepreneurial Campus. This will be done in a collaborative, sector specific way. The additional uplift from UIF has allowed more available funding within our Entrepreneurship Project and the continuation of our successful Student Enterprise Competition launched in AY 2022-23. Additionally, ensuring appropriate additional resource to enhance our entrepreneurial offering, augmenting existing activities and enabling more opportunities for students, staff, and alumni and improving graduate outcomes and contributing to regional and national economic growth.

The UHI-wide Scottish Entrepreneurship and Enterprise Educators programme (SEE) will continue in 2023-24 with a face-to-face model following recent years of online delivery. This programme will train our academics to become entrepreneurial role models, equipped to drive change in their institutions and surrounding communities. The training course raises awareness of entrepreneurial opportunities as well as the potential for additional outputs from research. We also offer an 'Enterprising Researcher' online training course and, in 2023-24, will deliver our new 'Mid Careers Researcher' programme which was developed using UIF funds.

UHI leads the Highlands and Islands Business Ideas competition, which is open to all staff and students as well as Highlands and Islands businesses, local community groups and individuals. Competition finalists are encouraged to forward their proposals to the national Converge Challenge competition. In 2023, a new spin-out company from SAMS that uses marine worms to clean up waste from fish farms won the national Converge Challenge prize.

During 2023-24, we will continue to collaborate with Converge Challenge through an innovation steering group. The group will oversee the development of additional workshops and events aimed at stimulating entrepreneurship and enterprise among our post-graduate and early career researcher as well as more senior staff. The aim is to influence the research culture to encourage more staff and student to come forward with innovative ideas that would feed the pipeline of applicants to the UHI Student Enterprise Competition, UHI Business Idea competition as well as Converge Challenge, RSE Enterprise Fellowships and other innovation-focused support programmes.

In addition, the successful 'catalyst' programme, launched in 2021-22, will continue. The initiative provides a suite of six modules aimed at start-ups and SMEs who wish to develop themselves and their business. Through Catalyst we plan to support entrepreneurship and greater innovation in the economy, to improve and increase the universities engagement with industry and strengthen university to business relationships.



### 7.3 Innovation Vouchers (IVs)

The university aims to increase the existing target of completing ten Innovation Vouchers to twelve during 2023-24. As last year, we plan to use some of the UIF outcome grant to supplement newly won IVs with an additional £3,000 per voucher (for the first twelve vouchers awarded). This supports pre-grant award activities such as business engagement, project planning and application writing. This approach appears to be working as a means of incentivising researchers to submit more project proposals.

### 7.4 Funding, equality, and diversity

UHI (and our academic partners) confirm the intention to utilise and match fund the UIF Platform Grant for 2023-24.

Through all the activities described above we intend to secure a sustained KE income exceeding £10 million per annum in 2023-24. This is the same target as last year but is considered even more challenging due to the changes in various funding streams.

UHI is committed to supporting and engaging with the Knowledge and Innovation Fund (KEIF) development and implementation with SFC and RCDG. We have provided and will continue to provide feedback through the development and consultation stages, including attendance at the SFC event in Edinburgh and have responded to the initial proposals shared with RCDG.

UHI is also committed to equality of opportunity and non-discrimination in all aspects of our work and study. We accept our obligations to fulfil the statutory requirements relating to equality and diversity and will take steps to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment, and victimisation; advance equality of opportunity between people from different groups; and foster good relations between people from different groups, tackling prejudice and promoting understanding.



## Outcome Agreement between the University of the Highlands and Islands and the Scottish Funding Council for AY 2023-24

**On behalf of the University of the Highlands and Islands:**

Signed:

Print name: Vicki Nairn

Position: Principal and Vice-Chancellor

Date: 22 November 2023

Signed:

Print name: Alastair MacColl

Position: Chair of Court

Date: 22 November 2023

**On behalf of the Scottish Funding Council:**

Signed: 

Print name: Karen Watt

Position: Chief Executive

Date: 15 January 2024