From research partnership to impact generation: How KTPs drive REF 2029 success

KTP2025
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Introductions

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I have worked at UoM since 2012, primarily in research impact. I've supported REF case study development for REF 2014, 2021 and now for REF 2029.

Vera Barron

Research Impact Manager, Manchester Metropolitan University

I have 25 years of research & impact development experience. I have supported KE activity and KTP development at two UK Universities & co-delivered a 'KTP' pilot programme in the Czech Republic.

Emma Sutton

Impact & Engagement Associate, The University of Salford

Emma has supported research impact since 2018 and led the REF case study development for REF 2021 and for the forthcoming audit in 2029.

Workshop agenda

○ Setting the scene: REF, the UN SDGs & research impact

○ Understanding REF impact: what counts, how it's assessed, and why it matters for KTPs

○ Real world examples: how regional KTPs contributed to high-quality Impact Case Studies

○ From project to impact: practical steps to design and evidence impact through KTPs

○ Q&A

What is the Research Excellence Framework (REF)?

- UK system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions

- Takes place approximately every 7-8 years; previous exercises in 2014 and 2021; impact agenda introduced in 2014

- The next exercise is REF 2029 (submission in late 2028)

- Assessment is by expert review involving senior academics, international experts and research users

- Assessment takes place via 34 subject-based Units of Assessment and four main panels (A-D).

Why the REF is important

◦ Informs the allocation of block-grant research funding to higher education institutions (HEIs) based on research quality.
The REF outcomes are used to inform the allocation of approx. £2 billion per year of public funding for universities' research.

◦ Provides accountability for public investment in research and produces evidence of the benefits of this investment.

◦ Provides insights into the health of research in HEIs in the UK.

https://ref.ac.uk/about-the-ref/what-is-the-ref/

What are the UN Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs)?

https://sdgs.un.org/goals

The *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, adopted by all United Nations members in 2015, created 17 **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).** The SDGs are a global call to action to address the most urgent challenges facing humanity and the planet.

The SDGs include:
Goal 1: No poverty
Goal 3: Good health and well-being
Goal 8: Decent work and economic growth
Goal 10: Reduced inequalities
Goal 13: Climate action

How the UN SDGs connect KTPs and REF impact

REF Concept	KTP Activity	UN SDG Link	How They Align
Impact – change or benefit beyond academia	KTPs apply university research in real-world settings to improve productivity, sustainability, or wellbeing.	SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation & Infrastructure), SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals)	KTPs directly strengthen innovation capacity and partnerships — the heart of both REF impact and SDG delivery.
Reach (evaluatory criterion of impact) – breadth of beneficiaries	KTP projects often influence not only the company partner but supply chains, local communities, and sectors.	SDG 8 (Decent Work & Economic Growth), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities & Communities)	Broader social or regional benefits demonstrate reach in REF and tangible SDG progress.
Significance (evaluatory criterion of impact) - depth or importance of change	Tangible improvements in energy efficiency, health, inclusivity, or digital transformation.	SDG 3 (Good Health & Wellbeing), SDG 12 (Responsible Consumption & Production), SDG 13 (Climate Action)	The more meaningful the improvement, the higher the REF significance — and the stronger the SDG alignment.
Evidence – corroboration of change	KTP final reports, testimonials, new business models, environmental savings, social value metrics.	SDG Indicators and THE Impact Rankings	REF requires independent evidence; SDG metrics provide a recognised global language for this.

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UN SDGs and UK HE rankings

The annual **Times Higher Education Impact Rankings** identifies and celebrates universities that demonstrate comprehensive excellence in contributing to global sustainable development.

By excelling in a variety of SDGs, these universities showcase their commitment to addressing the world's most pressing challenges, including environmental sustainability, social inclusion, economic growth and partnerships.

In 2025, **2,526** universities from **130** countries or territories were ranked based on their progress towards the UN SDGs. It is becoming increasingly important for higher education institutions to document and evidence their activities in this area.

https://www.timeshighereducation.com/impactrankings

The REF: structure of the assessment (2029 provisional)

Engagement & Impact

- **25%**
- **Impact case studies** and an accompanying statement.
- For REF, impact refers to effects, benefits and changes beyond academia resulting from research.

Contribution to Knowledge & Understanding

- **50%**
- Based on assessment of research outputs and will also include evidence of broader contributions to the advancement of the discipline.

People, Culture & Environment

- **25%**
- *Previous REF exercises assessed the unit's environment for supporting research and enabling impact.*
- REF2029 will include an increased emphasis on research culture.

The elements above are assessed to produce an overall quality profile for each discipline submission. 1*-4* quality levels are used for each element and for the overall quality profile of each submission.

Final REF 2029 weightings and details are to be confirmed.

REF disciplinary panels & Units of Assessment

REF 2029 – Units of Assessment

A Medicine, Health & Life Sciences

1. Clinical Medicine

2. Public Health, Health Services and Primary Care

3. Allied Health Professions, Dentistry, Nursing and Pharmacy

4. Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience

5. Biological Sciences

6. Agriculture, Food and Veterinary Sciences

B Physical Sciences, Engineering & Mathematics

7. Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences

8. Chemistry

9. Physics

10. Mathematical Sciences

11. Computer Science and Informatics
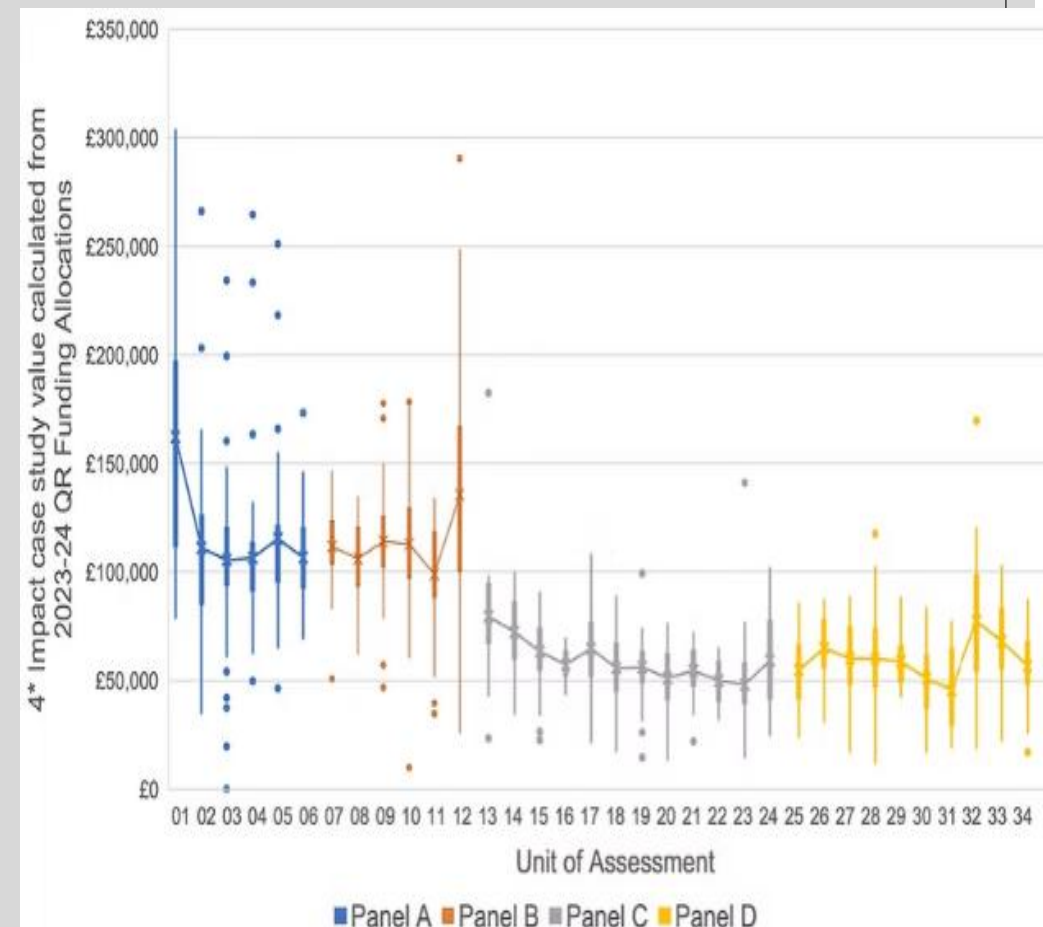
12. Engineering

C Social Sciences

13. Architecture, Built Environment and Planning

14. Geography and Environmental Studies

15. Archaeology

16. Economics and Econometrics

17. Business and Management Studies

18. Law

19. Politics and International Studies

20. Social Work and Social Policy

21. Sociology

22. Anthropology and Development Studies

23. Education

24. Sport and Exercise Sciences, Leisure and Tourism

D Arts & Humanities

25. Area Studies

26. Modern Languages and Linguistics

27. English Language and Literature

28. History

29. Classics

30. Philosophy

31. Theology and Religious Studies

32. Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory

33. Music, Drama, Dance, Performing Arts, Film and Screen Studies

34. Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management

Value of research impact in QR income terms

Main Panel	UOAs	Annual Value (4★ ICS)	Total (8 Years)	Annual Value (4★ Output)	Total (8 Years)
Panel A – Medicine, Health & Life Sciences	1–6	£110,000	£880,000	£7,000	£56,000
Panel B – Physical Sciences, Engineering & Mathematics	7–12	£110,000	£880,000	£6,000	£48,000
Panel C – Social Sciences	13–25	£60,000	£480,000	£3,000	£24,000
Panel D – Arts & Humanities	26–34	£60,000	£480,000	£2,000	£16,000

Source: https://www.fasttrackimpact.com/post/how-much-are-ref2021-4-impact-case-studies-and-4-outputs-worth?

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REF impact: definition

An effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia. (REF 2021)

Includes effects, changes or benefits for:

- The health and wellbeing of people, and animal welfare
- Creativity, culture and society
- Social welfare
- Commerce and the economy
- Production
- Public policy, law and services
- Practitioners and delivery of professional services, enhanced performance or ethical practice
- Environment
- Understanding, learning and participation.

REF assessment criteria for impact

Reach

The extent and/or diversity of the beneficiaries of the impact, as relevant to the nature of the impact.

+

Significance

The degree to which the impact has enabled, enriched, influenced, informed or changed the performance, policies, practices, products, services, understanding, awareness or wellbeing of the beneficiaries.

REF impact case studies: key components

Impact case study (REF3)

REF2021

Institution:

Unit of Assessment:

Title of case study:

Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:

Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:

Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:

Period when the claimed impact occurred:

Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? Y/N

1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)

2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

Description of research carried out in the submitting unit; research references

Narrative explaining the nature and extent of the impact and its relationship with the research

List of corroborating sources for key claims

The role of evidence

Case studies need to present evidence to demonstrate:

- The relationship between the research and the impact claimed. Did the research make a distinct and material contribution to the impact described?
- The reach and significance of the impacts claimed.

Evidence is presented in:

- **The narrative account of the impact** - *incorporate indicators and evidence into the narrative.*
- **The list of corroborating sources** - *evidence and indicators should be independent and have verifiable sources, which must be listed and made available for audit.*

Examples of corroborating sources for impact case studies

Testimonials or statements from partner organisations, users or beneficiaries

Reports or annual accounts from partner organisations, users, beneficiaries or policymakers

Media coverage

Results from user surveys, questionnaires or interviews

Professional/practitioner guidelines

Websites/pages documenting impact; website analytics reports

Examples of indicators and evidence – incorporated into the case study narrative

Relating to impacts on commerce and the economy

Business performance measures, e.g. turnover/profits

Employment figures; jobs created or protected

Sales of new products/services

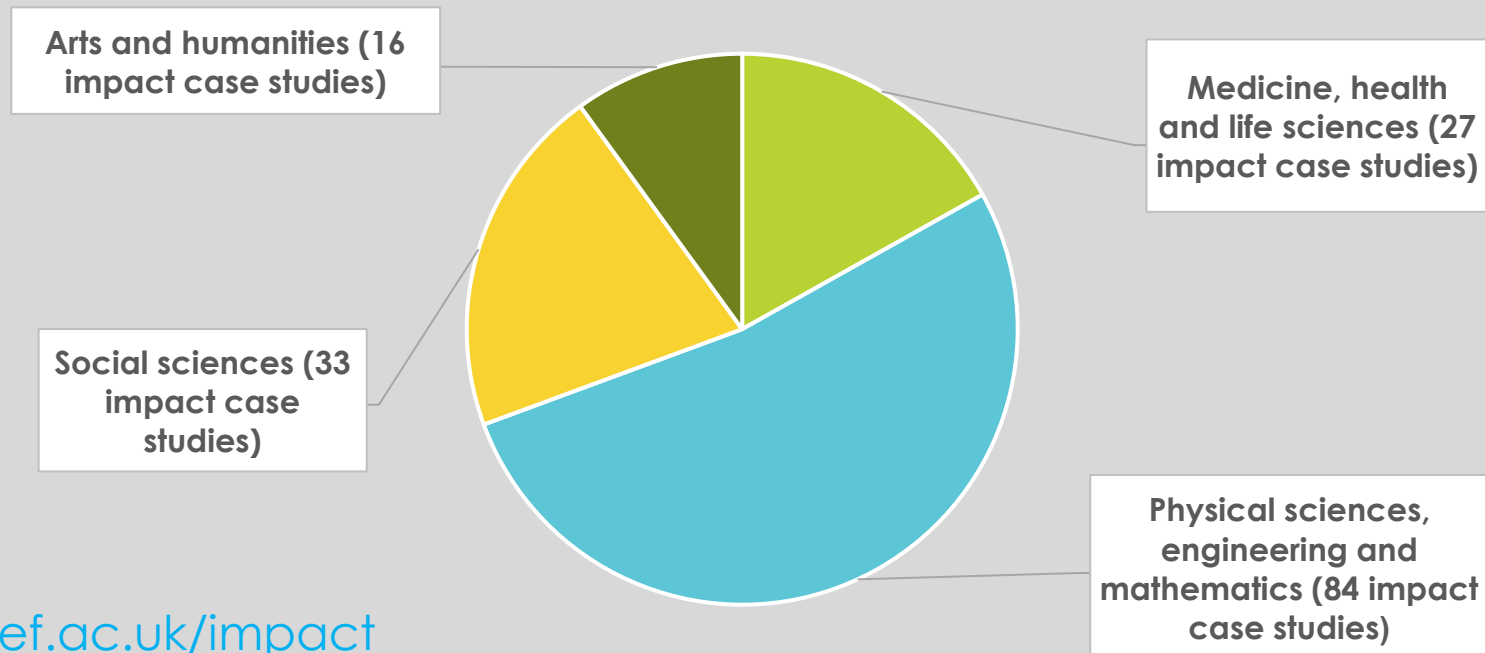Commercial adoption of a new technology, process, knowledge or concept

Investment funding raised from UK and/or non-UK agencies

KTPs in REF 2021 impact case studies

A keyword search for "Knowledge Transfer Partnership" in the impact database generated **160** examples from REF 2021.

Impact case studies involving KTPs – by discipline area

Arts and humanities (16 impact case studies)

Medicine, health and life sciences (27 impact case studies)

Social sciences (33 impact case studies)

Physical sciences, engineering and mathematics (84 impact case studies)

https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact

KTP Example from University of Salford

KTPs involved: Sigma Consulting Solutions Ltd; FastWebMedia; Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council; Avoira; Hydro-X Water Treatment Ltd.

Underpinning research: Salford's researchers partnered with 12 SMEs through KTPs or KXPs during the REF 2021 cycle, utilising insights from research outputs to initiate processes of digital transformation that created long-term change within these organisations.

Impact included: Generating social and economic benefit by delivering sustainable organisational changes within each of the SMEs that increased their economic value and created innovative environments capable of delivering further commercial success.

Impact indicators and evidence: Generation of substantial additional value to each of the SMEs through acquisition of new business, increase in group sales, creation of new business models and patented technology, generation of revenues through improved digital presence and development of new income streams.

Corroborating sources: Testimonial from Sigma on the values-driven approach to innovation introduced by the KTP; final KTP report from FastWebMedia outlining the shift in business model and transformation change as a result of the KTP; a letter confirming one of the KTPs ranked as 'outstanding'; testimonial from Tameside MBC on the development of its empty homes strategy resulting from the KTP; testimonial from Avoira on the improvement in company revenues and marketing techniques as a result of the KTP; final KTP report from Hydro-X on the company's improved digital presence and revenues generated by the KXP; testimonial from an agency that has worked with Salford on its digital transformation, confirming the mutually beneficial relationship which has driven the development of innovative products and services.

KTP Example from Manchester Metropolitan University

REF Impact Case Study:
Driving global growth in production of recyclable high barrier packaging films
(Submitted to Unit of Assessment 12 – Engineering)

KTP involvement: In partnership with Bobst Manchester Ltd., Manchester Metropolitan University research has enabled innovation in packaging film manufacturing solutions that addresses market-led demand for recyclable food packaging films with enhanced barrier properties and product visibility.

Impacts included: Since the first product launched in October 2013, Bobst has grown its global market share of aluminium oxide (AlOx) film manufacturing equipment from 20% to >50% and increased worldwide high barrier AlOx film production capacity by around 200%. Bobst has attracted sales because its systems can reduce the film thickness by up to 50% without affecting barrier performance. This 'down-gauging' and the 100% recyclability of the AlOx coatings is helping major global brand owners like Nestlé and PepsiCo meet their commitment for 100% recyclable, reusable or compostable packaging materials by 2025.

Impact indicators and evidence: global market share, increased turnover and profit, Bobst Manchester's designation as a global Centre of Excellence in food and drinks packaging solution design.

Corroborating sources: company annual reports, marketing literature, testimonial from the company MD, the business securing a major UKRI Future Leaders Fellowship.

KTP Example from The University of Manchester

REF Impact Case Study:
Transforming public understanding and engagement, improving staff and volunteer practice, and increasing revenue in the National Trust's north of England region
(Submitted to Unit of Assessment 28 – History)

This impact case study builds on ESRC & AHRC research grants, an ESRC IAA-funded placement and an AHRC KTP. **The AHRC KTP linked researchers and National Trust teams across the north of England region.**

Impacts included: Enhanced interpretation practice; created models of best practice for collaboration between academic researchers and the National Trust; created new academic engagement posts; increased revenue to National Trust.

Impact indicators and evidence included: Number of new posts created; value of new collaborative research funding coordinated by the KTP; value of Trust sales turnover and annual profit; number of visitors in relevant time period; value of membership sales.

Corroborating sources: Toolkit documents designed to support collaboration between the National Trust and academic researchers (Trust website); KTP Final Company Partner Report; UoM film documenting the KTP and its impact on the partner organisation.

Practical steps for KTP teams to build impact early

- **Embed impact thinking from the outset**
  - Map your potential beneficiaries beyond the company partner – for example industry bodies, supply chains, policymakers or communities affected by the innovation.
  - Co-produce an 'impact pathway' at project initiation showing how project activities could/will lead to change (outputs – outcomes – impacts).
  - Define your base line (what is the current problem or status quo) and your success indicators so both academic & the company teams know what evidence to capture
- **Set up simple evidence capture system**
  - Add short impact log to your monthly progress reports. ***Ask what has changed for the partner organisation this month? (e.g. new skills, attitudes, knowledge, product design, prototype, process, behaviours, performance, etc.)***
  - Keep a shared evidence folder (customer feedback, new contracts, product or staff performance data, screenshots of media mentions, etc.)
  - Ask that the final KTP report explicitly summarises benefits beyond the company (e.g. sectoral, regional, policy, or societal).
- **Plan for post-project follow up**
  - Schedule a 6-12 month post-KTP follow up to gather data on sustained outcomes (new jobs, turnover, spin outs, patents, carbon savings, etc.)
  - Ask your company partners for testimonial letters which specify the change or benefit and the role of the university research
  - Produce a joint case study or an article soon after the project completion to increase awareness (or reach) of your work.

Practical step for KTP teams to build impact early (cont.)

- **Encourage partners describe benefits in REF-friendly terms:**
  - Reach – who and how many benefited (e.g. number of clients , countries, companies, groups)
  - Significance - the scale or importance of the change (e.g. cost savings, new jobs, environmental protections, carbon savings, new efficiencies, increased productivity, safer infrastructure, etc.)
- **Engage the KTP Associates in the process**
  - Include impact awareness in associate induction, share examples of previously submitted Impact Case Studies
  - Encourage them to keep a reflective log on how research is being applied in practice.
  - Nominate an Associate impact champion to liaise with the university impact team
- **Connect your KTP activity to the UN SDGs**
  - Explicitly link your project outputs to the SDGs
  - Use the SDG framework to show wider social value beyond commercial gain (useful for the business partners too for their marketing and reporting and product description literature.

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Key points to remember

- Encourage KTP partnerships to consider research impact from the very outset of their project and plan for it!

- Encourage Associates to attend internal impact training and produce an Impact Plan for the project.

- Consider evidence capture requirements for evaluating progress as the project develops but importantly post-project.

- Cultivate a long-term relationship with the company/academic/university to aid future monitoring and evaluation.

- Encourage post-project review. Identify potential knowledge exchange needs to aid productisation/commercialisation of project outputs, to support long-term engagement and follow-up.

- **Be open and transparent about institutional impact goals and reporting requirements from the start of the KTP.**

Q&A