# Birkbeck, University of London

# Research Strategy 2014-2019

## Introduction

Birkbeck, University of London is a research-intensive university. Central to our mission is the aim of maintaining and developing excellence in research and providing the highest quality research training in all our subject areas, and also of making available the results of research and the expertise acquired, through teaching, publication, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of civic and public debate. It is embedded in the culture of Birkbeck that we should carry out excellent research across the entire range of disciplines represented in the College’s Schools; that this research should range across ‘blue skies’ scientific work, cutting edge scholarship in the arts, humanities and social sciences, and highly applicable interventions in technology, social policy and artistic work; and that we seek to offer research-led and research-informed teaching at all levels.

The College has developed a Research Strategy 2014-19 to articulate the way we wish to set about achieving our aims. This Strategy is the result of a process of substantial consultation involving representatives of the Schools, the administrative Departments related to research, and Birkbeck’s academic management. The Strategy is in two parts: a statement of principles and a set of proposals to govern research activity over the 2014-19 period in order to achieve the various ambitions expressed here.

The Strategy was approved by the Academic Board on 13th November 2014.

## Part 1: Principles

Birkbeck’s distinctive mission to combine the highest international standards of research and teaching with a commitment to reaching the widest possible student population has developed over nearly 200 years of activity. The College’s five Schools (Arts; Business, Economics and Informatics; Law; Science; Social Sciences, History and Philosophy) cover a large spectrum of academic interests; within them, there is specialisation that produces very strong, focused research, reflected in submissions to fourteen different ‘Units of Assessment’ (UoAs) in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF). This research work is based in and across Departments within the Schools, which means that it is well located to inform the College’s teaching. Much of it is also enhanced by Research Centres and Institutes that encourage cross-Departmental, interdisciplinary collaborations enriching the quality of the research and enabling it to engage with the complex problems presented by contemporary issues and with the demands of the national and global environment.

Birkbeck’s special characteristics significantly affect its research activity. We are a relatively small institution for one that is highly research active and has broad, multi-disciplinary coverage. Whilst this produces problems of scale in some areas, it also offers many benefits in promoting interaction between different subject areas, less division between disciplinary and administrative sections, more openness and a willingness to innovate. It also generates the incentive for collaboration across the College and with other institutions, which itself encourages new thinking and enables larger-scale research to take place. Birkbeck is sited in the heart of a great metropolis, which means that there is a constant flow of visitors, large numbers of students, and an in-built attraction for talented academics wishing to work in close proximity to scientific and artistic resources and to many other high calibre research institutions. Birkbeck also has an unusual teaching culture, with approximately 50% of its student body being postgraduate; this offers many opportunities for researchers to share their work as part of their teaching role, and to be stimulated and challenged by students who are already knowledgeable in their discipline, and who, because of the high concentration of ‘mature’ students in the College, have connections with relevant areas of work and social and policy activity.

In setting this Strategy, we aim to build on Birkbeck’s research strengths and to raise all our research activity to the level of our strongest areas. Our approach to this is underpinned by the following principles.

### Inspiring research comes from empowered researchers

Birkbeck’s research is carried out by groups and individuals who have the freedom to develop their own research priorities. Our belief is that this is not just the best way to promote creativity in the research community; it is the *only* way to do so. It is our academics who are best placed to identify the important issues in their areas of expertise; it is they who are most likely to spot new ideas and new directions; and it is when they can work on the things that interest them that the best outcomes are likely to be achieved. The role of the College in this – represented by its Schools and Departments as well as by central management – is to create the best possible conditions for researchers to pursue their own intellectual interests.

### Everyone contributes

Birkbeck is committed to encouraging all academic staff[[1]](#endnote-1) to participate actively in research. We appoint people who are enthusiastic about research in their area and who show an aptitude for it, and we then offer them the opportunity to pursue their interests, where possible in collaboration with others. Research achievements are valued and recognised as a major way in which the College fulfils its mission, and through which individual members of staff fulfil their career ambitions. We encourage all staff to undertake research in ways that allow them to be entered into the REF or equivalent and to maximise the resources available to them, but we also recognise that research excellence is not identical with REF or funding criteria.

### Working with others

Birkbeck is fully supportive of ‘lone scholars’ but also recognises that much research is carried out collaboratively. All our academic staff members are based in Departments or Institutes within our Schools, providing them with a network of colleagues. Linking across these bases are interdisciplinary Centres and Institutes recognised by the College. These encourage research with thematic foci and/ or methodological approaches that cannot be contained within any single discipline or department, particularly by offering opportunities for researchers from different Departments to come together for debate and co-work.

### Working across institutional boundaries

We recognise that however historically rooted a discipline might be, and however effectively a Department or even the College as a whole might support its research, organisational structures can have constraining as well as enabling effects. Birkbeck encourages researchers to connect with others across the institution and in other universities and research units. We are especially keen to capitalise on Birkbeck’s geographical position in the heart of London, with its enormous array of cultural, artistic and scientific institutions and its considerable population of academics and researchers working on every conceivable kind of research question. Birkbeck is also further internationalising its research through partnerships with universities abroad, in order both to facilitate new understandings and to enhance our ability to confront global issues. Birkbeck encourages partnerships and formal links as well as the networks of informal contact and co-researching arrangements that are characteristic of a thriving intellectual life.

### Good research is critical research

Birkbeck has a long history of engagement with social and political issues as well as with scientific matters that demand fearless and innovative approaches and ways of thinking. The College supports independent-minded researchers willing to question normative assumptions and accepted ways of doing things. It recognises that some important scholarship and research will be controversial, and it protects the right of its academics to pursue such work with integrity.

### Good research is ethical research

Ethical research not only protects researchers and research participants against potential harm that could arise during the research process, but it also makes a positive contribution to the interests and well-being of participants, researchers and society as a whole. This can be through many routes, such as actively addressing suffering and hardship, opening out neglected areas of oppression, identifying talents and opportunities for personal growth or social development, or simply expanding the boundaries of knowledge. Birkbeck is fully committed to encouraging ethical research in this broad sense and to ensuring that its research community has ethical practice as a cornerstone of its activities.

### Good research takes time and sustained attention

There are powerful pressures on researchers to work quickly and publish extensively, especially in the context of the REF process and competition for grants and senior academic positions. Birkbeck is nevertheless cognizant of how high-quality research demands sustained attention and a commitment over time that may not fit easily with the culture of instant results. The College aims to provide conditions under which such research can be carried out and in particular to make it possible for researchers to pursue studies that require a long-term commitment and significant investment of time and resources.

### Research matters

Whilst we remain cautious about the narrowly defined ‘impact agenda’ that has arisen through the REF process, it has always been part of Birkbeck’s ambition that we sustain a research culture that makes a positive difference to society in important ways. This can range from offering artistic insights and critical commentaries on social and political events to exploring the basic science underlying health and environmental problems. Without prejudice to ‘blue skies’ work, which we regard as fundamental to the research process, Birkbeck will seek to enhance its infrastructure for supporting the engagement of its researchers with social issues; for facilitating the development of applications of research, and of applied research; and for making constructive partnerships that might allow research findings to be developed and exploited creatively.

### Researchers need support and guidance

Academics of all levels of seniority, but perhaps especially when they are early on in their career, will almost always benefit from opportunities for discussion about their research with colleagues whose task it is to help them develop their work to its best possible level. This type of ‘mentoring’ support should be available to everyone when required, as well as being a routine element in the provision that the College makes for new entrants. Researchers may also benefit from additional training, and the College aims to make provision for this wherever possible.

### Research and teaching are linked

Birkbeck proudly asserts that it is a research-led and research-informed teaching institution. Exactly how this is manifested in practice varies across disciplines and also according to the level of teaching. It means that all our academic staff members also carry out research so that even when they are not teaching directly on their own specialist topics, their academic understanding is rooted in their practice as researchers and scholars. It also means that where opportunities arise, students can benefit from direct contact with, and teaching by, individuals who are engaged with research in the topic areas of interest. And it means that the curriculum is heavily influenced by our academics’ up-to-date understanding of changing research agendas, advances in knowledge, and contemporary methodological challenges. Whilst the College is committed to providing research leave and to encouraging academics to gain research grants that allow them time away from teaching in order to pursue a research project, and whilst is also the case that some levels and areas of teaching are best delivered by specialist Teaching and Scholarship staff, these factors are balanced against the additional principle that there should be no separation of the academic community into ‘research’ and ‘teaching’ groups.

### Research needs resources

Research can be a costly activity, especially but not exclusively in the sciences. The College recognises that there is a partnership between using institutional resources in the interests of research and encouraging researchers to raise additional funds through bids for external grants. Birkbeck supports research financially through providing opportunities for academics to carry out research as an expected aspect of their work, and tries to help its members of staff sustain a reasonable balance of research, teaching and administrative/managerial responsibilities. It also provides an infrastructure of peer review and research support to encourage research grant applications and to ensure that they are of the highest possible quality. Through its Schools, it offers basic financial help for conference attendance and ‘seeding’ new research ideas. It works closely with research groups in developing capital projects to provide the necessary buildings and equipment for large scale or expensive specialist work. The College is developing a new financial strategy predicated on reinvestment and will include consideration of research investment in this strategy.

### Leadership matters

Birkbeck appreciates that inspirational leadership is enormously important in research. Such leadership can be at all levels, from Schools to large research groups to relatively informal networks. The College aims to encourage everyone to take up leadership roles where appropriate, and to have increasing opportunities to do so as their careers develop. It will invest in leadership training and mentoring where it is helpful, and offer actual and potential leaders the chance to initiate and run their own activities where these can be aligned with School and College priorities. It will also endeavour to respond to the needs of research leaders in a constructive way.

### Future researchers matter

As a signatory to the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers*, Birkbeck is committed to advancing the prospects of more junior researchers as a major way in which it sustains and renews its research community. PhD students are regarded as vital contributors to this community and are included in many of its research teams and in the activities of its Centres and Institutes. High quality supervision is the key to the positive development of the careers of these students. The College is committed to supporting and developing researchers hired on external research grants, while recognising their often finite time with the College and the need for them to network in the wider academic community.

Birkbeck’s employment strategy gives priority to promising new academics within an organisational context in which there are good opportunities for promotion. It recognises that early career academics benefit from well-developed mentoring arrangements and that where possible their research time should be protected to facilitate development of their research activities.

### Equality of Opportunity Matters

Birkbeck seeks to provide the highest quality academic and working environment where all staff, students, visitors and contractors are employed, welcomed, respected and treated in a consistent and non-discriminatory manner. This approach will be applied irrespective of race, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, religion or faith, political belief and social status. We are committed to promoting equality of opportunity in all aspects of our activities, through the development of fair and equitable policies, procedures, academic programmes of study, courses, training and development programmes which are consistently applied and regularly monitored. We encourage and promote an inclusive approach that treats colleagues, students and other service users with respect.

1. ‘Academic staff’ refers here to lecturers, senior lecturers, readers and professors and equivalent research staff; it does not include Teaching and Scholarship staff who do not have research in their contracts. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)