

**Institution:** Birkbeck, University of London

## 1. Context and mission

Founded in 1823 to provide educational opportunities for working Londoners, Birkbeck, University of London, has a long and proud tradition of opening up knowledge for the benefit of society. Our mission has not changed and it rests on a foundation of expanding education and professional/knowledge-based opportunities to all.

We are based in Bloomsbury and have over 12,000 students studying at every level from short courses and certificates to Ph.D. Uniquely in the UK, the overwhelming majority of Birkbeck students are studying in the evening, and a significant proportion do so part-time (2019/20: 52% UG; 77% PGT; and 55% PGR). As a result, many are also in full, or part-time, employment. Many Birkbeck students are from the Greater London area, and they reflect the social and demographic profile of the city. In 2019/20, 57% of the student population were female, 41% from BAME backgrounds with an average age on entry of 30 (UG); 33 (PGT) and 37 (PGR).

We are a world leading research-intensive university with a long tradition of engaging with cultural, environmental, political, scientific, and social issues in new and innovative ways. We make the results of our research available through research-led teaching (and through this to employers across London), public dissemination, partnerships with other organisations of all types, and the promotion of civic and public debate. There is no “one size fits all”, we tailor our approach to the specific needs of our audience, routinely working with stakeholders including employers, trade unions, local councils, NGOs and others to deliver our mission.

The College has five Schools (Arts; Business, Economics and Informatics (BEI); Law; Science; and Social Science, History and Philosophy (SSHPP)) and 19 Departments (<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/departments/>) which make up the 15 Units of Assessment in our REF submission. We cover the spectrum of arts, humanities and social and environmental/natural/life sciences and some physical sciences but we do not have teaching or research in medicine or engineering.

Birkbeck has a unique student body and an educational offer of the highest standards globally, being ranked in the top 35% of higher education institutions in the [QS World University Rankings 2020](#) (including in the top 6% for its ability to attract international students from 116 countries). In the THE World Rankings 2020: Psychology and Arts and Humanities at the College were ranked in the top 100 worldwide; Social Sciences in the top 250; and Business and Economics in the top 300.

The department of Biological Sciences dates back to the foundation of the College and Helen Gwynne-Vaughan, J.D. Bernal and Rosalind Franklin have all featured amongst its faculty. Birkbeck's department of Computer Science and Information Systems was founded in 1957, making it one of the oldest world-wide. Birkbeck has been home to many distinguished scholars, including Lillian Penson (the first person to be awarded a PhD in the University of London and the first woman Vice-Chancellor of the University), Nikolaus Pevsner, the College's first Professor of Art History, and the former College president, Eric Hobsbawm. In 2020, Professor Sarah Hart of our Economics, Mathematics and Statistics department was appointed the first ever woman Gresham Professor in Geometry. Other departments reflect the changes of the last 200 years through the emergence of new intellectual paradigms (Department of Psychosocial Studies, established 2000) or the recognition that the College now has critical mass in an area such as the Department of Criminology (established 2018).

## 2. Strategy

Birkbeck's current research strategy (see [Our research — Birkbeck, University of London \(bbk.ac.uk\)](#)) is to maintain excellence across our broad range of disciplines, to ensure that all

staff have the freedom to develop their research, and to provide the highest quality training in all our subject areas and at every stage of an academic career. Birkbeck's commitment to promoting equality and diversity amongst its researchers is deeply ingrained, as the careers of, amongst others, Helen Gwynne-Vaughan (Head of Department 1909/Professor of Botany 1921) or Lillian Penson demonstrate. The College seeks to draw maximum advantage from its central London location to collaborate with neighbouring HEIs, research institutions and the scientific and cultural resources of the capital.

The five key aims articulated in our current research strategy are:

- Empowering individual researchers by providing time, resources, support and guidance;
- Ensuring that all researchers are valued, enjoy equal opportunities and can contribute, from early career to research leaders;
- Promoting collaborative research across disciplinary, institutional and geographic boundaries;
- Assuring that our research is of the highest ethical standards;
- Ensuring that excellent research and teaching are mutually reinforcing and beneficial for researchers and staff.

These aims remain fundamental to our future vision of providing the best possible support and infrastructure for research. In addition, over the next census period we shall seek to:

- Build on our strong international collaborations and to consolidate and expand existing European networks post-Brexit;
- Grow research income and develop Knowledge Exchange through links with external partners;
- Maintain and strengthen our successful collaborations with DTP partners and further increase our PGR numbers;
- Further reinforce the equalities and diversity agendas in our research cultures;
- Ensure the dissemination, public awareness and benefit of our research outside of the HE sector.

Since 2014, Birkbeck has reinforced its research support and governance structures. In 2015, the roles of PVC Research (PVC R) and Director of the Graduate School were combined into a single full-time academic management role. That was followed by the appointment of the Head of Research Strategy Support (HRSS) in 2016, and together they lead on the implementation of the College Research Strategy through the College Research Committee and its sub-committees and working groups.

The Research Strategy Group RSG (established in 2015, chaired by PVC(R)) brings together the Assistant Deans Research from the five Schools and acts as an executive for research matters, while the Research Support Group (established in 2015, chaired by HRSS) directs the research support activities of the central professional service departments. In addition, the REF Working Party, Open Research Working Group, KEF Working Group and the Research Student Sub-committee all report to the Research Committee for their respective areas of competence. Birkbeck launched an autonomous Research Office in 2018 by combining support staff that had previously formed part of the Finance Department, Secretariat, Registry or Schools and three additional posts were approved in the new Research Office to address under-capacity issues.

Birkbeck's current Impact Strategy (see [Our research — Birkbeck, University of London \(bbk.ac.uk\)](https://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/our-research)) was approved in 2018.

The College first employed impact officers in each of the five schools in 2012, and in 2014 it took the strategic decision to make these roles permanent in order to maintain an infrastructure that:

- monitors and promotes the applicability of the College's research;
- provides academic staff with regular training and updates relating to knowledge exchange and the Impact agenda;

- communicates our research to third parties;
- assists individual researchers and research groups to develop their impact strategies, identify partners and collect data about emerging impacts.

During the current REF cycle, the College has invested up to £10,000 per UoA in a targeted way to promote impact-focused activities and to support the delivery of the REF2014 impact templates in real time. Termly meetings between the impact officers and the PVC(R) were set up capture this and feed into the revisions of the College's impact and Research Strategies.

Success in embedding the impact agenda has been accompanied by the College's commitment to Public Engagement, which represents an investment of more than £300,000 over the census period. Since 2014, the College has secured a Wellcome Institutional Strategic Support Fund award, totalling £4.2 Million, including the match funding element, (Birkbeck is the one of very few institutions without a Medical School to be in receipt of sufficient Wellcome funding to receive this award) part of which was strategically directed towards the employment of a public engagement manager and the development of public engagement training, prizes and awards.

The College also secured funding from the RCUK/UKRI SEE PER (Strategic support to *Expedite Embedding Public Engagement with Research*) call to ensure that training and support for public engagement was available more widely across disciplines. (EP/R019649/1, total award value **£95,674**) Specialised training for PhD students was provided as a key part of this project, and led to, for example, the launch of the Birkbeck Three-Minute thesis competition, which is now an annual event.

## RESEARCH INTEGRITY

Birkbeck is committed to maintaining the highest possible standards of research integrity which is the responsibility of our College Ethics Committee. Chaired by an Executive Dean, it comprises a representative from each School, a lay member (not employed by the College) as well as representatives from our Professional Services departments and researchers (by invitation) with expertise in Research Ethics. Each School also has an ethics committee to review and approve ethics applications and to ensure suitable ethics and integrity training is provided to departments, while the College Ethics Committee's primary functions are to develop and oversee our policies relating to research integrity, the ethical conduct of our activities and research misconduct, and to provide a space for consideration of more substantive ethical questions facing researchers such as the use of social media and the effective, confidential preservation and reuse of qualitative datasets.

Our research misconduct procedure is the normal process by which we would expect questions relating to lapses of research integrity to be raised, but the College also has a more general whistleblowing process. Both of these procedures follow accepted sector norms as closely as possible for our particular constituency. Relevant information is on the College's website, and we also provide these details in our annual statement on Research Integrity to the UK Research Integrity Office.

## OPEN RESEARCH

Birkbeck's mission is an open knowledge mission, and thus the open access agenda is something that resonates strongly within the institution. Birkbeck researchers have access to our institutional open access repositories BIROn (outputs) and BIRD (data). We have been home to the Open Library for the Humanities since 2014 and were one of the earliest UK signatories to the DORA declaration on research assessment in 2017.

Birkbeck established the Open Access Working Group in 2014, reporting to the College Research Committee. As the remit of the OAWG has expanded, this has led to a broadening of its scope recognised by its renaming as College Open Research Working Group in 2018. The group is tasked with considering questions relating to open access, open data and reproducibility and has overseen the production of our research data management policy in 2016. The Group is

also tasked with maintaining up-to-date and accurate knowledge of any policies or developments pertaining to open research, including but not limited to those relevant to the REF, and disseminating these throughout the College.

### **NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH PRIORITIES**

Responsibility for ensuring that staff are fully informed about international, UK and research council policies and funding opportunities lies with the Research Office. Regular communication is provided via tools such as Research Professional, training and one to one coaching and invitations to outside funders to speak, including the Leverhulme Trust, the Wellcome Trust and UKRI.

The Research Strategy Group complements and extends the work of the Research Office and provides the necessary conduit between the Schools and the Centre.

National research priorities which have particular relevance to our constituency under the industrial strategy sector deals are the Life Science deal and the creative industries deal. Much of our research engages either directly or indirectly with the sustainable development goals.

### **INTERDISCIPLINARITY**

As a small research-intensive institution with a broad disciplinary range, Birkbeck is committed to interdisciplinary collaboration in order to maximise the opportunities and resources at its disposal.

In order to facilitate cooperation, the College has over forty active research Centres and supports eight recognised Institutes including the Birkbeck Institute for Data Analytics (BIDA), the Birkbeck Institute for the Humanities (BIH); the Birkbeck Institute for the Moving Image (BIMI); the Institute for Structural and Molecular Biology (ISMB); and the Birkbeck Institute for Social Research (BISR). Since 2014, the College has invested more than £1.5m in supporting the work of its Institutes.

Each of the research Institutes has a distinct mission, but BIDA, BIH, BIMI and BISR are specifically tasked with supporting Birkbeck's internal research environment and are directed by steering groups representing all five schools as well as early career academics and doctoral students, overseen by the PVC(R). A commitment to interdisciplinary research forms part of their respective terms of reference and is reflected in their activities which include annual visiting Fellowship schemes, summer schools, conferences, workshops, and public lectures and film screenings.

A similar interdisciplinary ethos permeates Birkbeck's research centres <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/centres/>. These activities are driven by the interests of our academics. Unlike some HEIs, Birkbeck has deliberately chosen not to identify specific research themes to shape its strategy. Instead, we remain determined to encourage excellence wherever it is to be found in line with our research strategy which seeks to create an environment where innovation and 'blue sky' thinking, can prosper.

New Centres established during the current REF cycle include the Centre for Museum Cultures, the Centre for Political Economy and Institutional Studies and the Building Resilience in Breast Cancer Centre. For a new Centre to be approved its sponsors need to convince the College Research Committee that it has a cross-institutional remit, a coherent and innovative research agenda and the necessary critical mass in terms of active members. It is also expected that to be sustainable a Centre will address a number of key issues that might include, but are not limited to, plans for seeking research grants, the dissemination of research findings through publications and other outputs, academic exchange both nationally and internationally and the development of doctoral and early career researchers.

**COLLABORATIONS, NETWORKS and PARTNERSHIPS**

Birkbeck takes full advantage of its geographical position in central London to build active research collaborations with a range of non-HEI partners, including museums, practitioners, activists and other organisations as well as other members of the University of London and the Schools of Advanced Study.

Over an extended period the College has maintained active research partnerships with its close neighbour, UCL, in relevant STEM subjects (see section 4. Below). Biological and Earth and Planetary Sciences are particularly closely integrated with UCL and have jointly appointed staff and shared state-of-the-art, laboratories and equipment (some of which has been renewed in this census period). Both have made joint returns to this and previous REF/RAE. There is also close collaboration and some equipment sharing between our Psychological Sciences Department and UCL but on a smaller scale.

Birkbeck is also closely integrated with the other University of London Colleges through Doctoral Training Partnerships including BBSRC (BBK, UCL, RVC, QMUL, LSHTM, KCL, Royal Holloway, Greenwich, Unilever, Kew, Animal and plant health agency); ESRC (BBK, LSHTM, SOAS, UCL, UEL); MRC (UCL) and the NERC (Brunel, QM, Royal Holloway, KCL, Institute of Zoology, Natural History Museum, and UCL). Birkbeck is not, however, exclusively London focused as its decision to join the CHASE AHRC DTP, headed by the University of Sussex and including the universities of Essex, Kent, and East Anglia demonstrates.

International research collaborations are apparent across every UoA in Birkbeck, and the College has joint externally funded research projects with international partners such as the Open Society University Network (OSUN) of which Birkbeck is an Educational partner, <https://osun.bard.edu/>. OSUN has provided scholarships for students from its partner organisations and the global south to attend our annual Critical Theory Summer School hosted by the BIH.

Birkbeck has also developed collaborations at institutional level, including a partnership with New York University (NYU) to share facilities and develop research collaborations. As part of that initiative Birkbeck and NYU are jointly funding an annual research fund of £50k for three years in the first instance, which offers grants to further scholarly activity that will deepen research collaborations between the two universities. Recipients of these grants can use their awards for travel and other expenses related to annual lectures, conferences, workshops, faculty exchanges or meetings for "works in progress" between the two universities.

**3. People**

Birkbeck encourages all academic staff to participate actively in research.

The College Research strategy is to appoint the best researchers in their field and to offer them the facilities and opportunities to develop their work and pursue their ideas and ambitions. Success is valued and recognised at every level and review processes are pro-actively used to support career ambitions.

The College recognises that research requires dedicated time away from other academic responsibilities and it is committed to providing research leave and to encouraging academics to gain research grants that allow them to pursue their work. All academic staff are entitled to one term's **Study Leave** after the completion of nine terms of service.

Birkbeck has a formal Flexible Working Policy but as the overwhelming majority of Birkbeck classes take place in the evening, between 6-9 pm, longstanding formal and informal mechanisms are in place to allow employees to request a change to their working hours and how work is to be carried out between home and the office (where appropriate). In addition, a

Workplace Wellbeing Steering Group was launched in the 2018/19 academic year to develop workplace wellbeing priorities for the College and to identify how these might be delivered.

## **CAREER PATHWAYS**

Career pathways for academic staff are articulated through the academic contractual framework, to ensure these are clear and transparent (actively rewarding research excellence) and the implementation of a departmentally agreed workload allocation models.

All academic and research staff are required to participate in an annual review process (including those on a fixed term contract of at least a year) to support career planning over a ca. 3-year timeline and to provide a forum to discuss related support and development.

All research active members of staff have the right to a mentor, who will discuss individual research plans, giving guidance and support in developing and managing research projects and producing appropriate publications. In the case of early career researchers, the provision of a mentor and regular meetings is a requirement placed on departments as a vital aspect of career development.

### **Early career researchers**

Birkbeck believes that early career researchers sustain and renew its research community. Having identified ECRs as a strategic priority, the College has, since 2016, taken a more strategic approach to all major calls from the Research Councils and other external funders of post-doctoral fellowships, advertising nationally for applicants and running internal selection competitions.

The success of the approach is demonstrated by the example of the Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellowships scheme which requires institutions to provide 50% salary costs which means it is important that these fellows are recruited in strategically important areas. The College has invested over £325k in the four rounds of the competition since this process was introduced, securing success rates well in excess of the national average (33%-60% against ~20% nationally), and we have noticed a trend of some applicants that we have selected withdrawing partway through the process following job offers from highly prestigious global institutions, which is a testament to the calibre of the candidates we attract. The success of this approach has led to it being extended to the British Academy Fellowships and UKRI Future Leaders Fellowships schemes with a College wide selection and interview process for supported candidates. In the first round of the FLF scheme, Birkbeck's department of History, Classics and Archaeology was the only Department in the country to have two successful applications.

As part of the £4.2M Wellcome ISSF award, £1.5 million has been invested in schemes that specifically support early career researchers or those returning from a career break, with an additional £1.5 million supporting PhD students for a further 6 months post submission – so 70% of this very large award has been spent directly supporting our ECRs and those returning from a career break.

### **Research students**

Birkbeck has invested in excess of £2 million per annum in PhD Studentships since 2014 across all disciplinary areas, including our Diversity 100 Scholarships which were launched across the five Schools in 2019 and are ringfenced for BAME candidates.

Following the outcome of REF 2014, Birkbeck took the decision to commission a major review of its PGR provision and the subsequent report provided 75 recommendations for the relaunch of the BGRS (<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/research/bgrs/>). These recommendations have all been fully actioned and implemented and the appointment of a new, full-time professional manager has

enabled the BGRS to act as the central focus for generic training and all stages of the PGR journey.

BGRS has an interdisciplinary PGR steering group with representatives from every School and department and PhD students are regarded as vital contributors to the research community and all Institutes and Centres are expected to have them as members.

### **Equality and diversity**

The College holds the HR Excellence in Research Award, which recognises its progress towards the implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. We also hold an institutional Athena SWAN Bronze award (alongside several School/Departmental awards; the College has adopted a formal timetable for all Schools/Departments to achieve/maintain their Athena SWAN awards by 2028).

To advance equality and diversity, Birkbeck is also:

- a Mindful Employer,
- a Disability Confident Employer,
- a Stonewall Diversity Champion
- a Race Equality Charter member.

We also run the annual Aurora and Stellar HE mentoring programmes for women and BAME staff respectively and strongly support the work of our Staff Diversity Networks: the Staff Disability Network; a LGBT+ staff network (OutatBirkbeck); the BAME staff network (Race, Equality and Cultural Heritage (REACH) network); and a Parents Network. A carers network is in development in response to the covid pandemic.

The College Equality and Diversity Committee supports and champions equality and diversity across the College – its members are from all Schools and include student and Trade Union representatives. An Assistant Dean (Equalities) has been appointed within each academic school to lead on equality and diversity issues, supporting the embedding of institutional and local equality initiatives such as training in equality & diversity and unconscious bias

Over this census period, the Equality and Diversity Committee has used an Equality Action Plan to monitor the progress of the delivery of its Equality Objectives.

In addition to the publication of its annual statutory Gender Pay Gap Report since 2017, the College undertakes periodic *Equal Pay Audits* to measure the impact of equality and diversity initiatives. It shows that that there are very few significant gaps in pay.

## **4. Income, infrastructure and facilities**

During the current REF cycle, Birkbeck has made significant progress in growing its external income. All Schools and departments have active research grants and the total value of the College Research Grant portfolio has risen from £45m in 2013/14 to £53m in 2019/20, an 18% increase over the period.

In order to ensure that each department/UoA has the opportunity to maximise research grant income, the Research Strategy Group is responsible for reviewing policies for staff mentoring and ensuring that rigorous peer review is compulsory for applicants. Only grants which have been signed off by the relevant Executive Dean are eligible for submission. The impact of these changes is reflected in College achieving a 36% success rate for applications submitted in 2018-19, a more than 10% increase in overall College success rates over the census period up to the 2018/19 academic year (the last year where full data is available, provisional data for 2019/20 suggest this has been maintained).

The Wellcome ISSF scheme has been hugely beneficial to the development of research in health and the medical humanities and that model was behind another strategic initiative to establish a Research Innovation Fund in 2018 which provides seed funding for projects from academics working in areas not eligible for Wellcome funding. Two funding streams are supported (early career/returning from a career break, and seed funding for new projects) across Birkbeck. A total of £92,306 has been awarded by this scheme so far.

### **Research Infrastructure and Collaborations with External Partners**

Thanks to its central London location, Birkbeck offers its researchers easy access to some of the world's finest library, archival and material resources including the British museum, British library and Senate House library. In addition, the College library has invested over £3.5m in journal subscriptions in every year of this REF cycle. The library also received a strategic investment of £1.3m to upgrade facilities in 2019.

The College has demonstrated its commitment to providing the highest quality research infrastructure by investing in state-of-the-art instrumentation and facilities with technicians as permanent staff, examples include:

The Birkbeck cryo EM lab, established by Professor Helen Saibil in 1990, is a major structural biology facility, with 5 microscopes including 2 high end systems, and an outstanding international reputation for research and training. Birkbeck and UCL have approved matching funds for an application for a Glacios screening microscope that will speed up screening of biological samples and grid conditions. Saibil was also the lead applicant on a Strategic Award (£15.6M) to set up the national cryoelectron microscopy facility at the Diamond Light Source for structural molecular and cell biology. This model has been widely adopted internationally for provision of high-end EM facilities, and continues to expand.

In addition, ISMB houses:

- 800 700, 600 and 500 MHz NMR spectrometers all with cryogenic probe, arguably the best NMR grouping of facilities in the country and it maintains close links with industry and other nearby national NMR facility such as the MRC Biomedical NMR Facility at the Francis Crick Institute,
- 3 custom-built fluorescence microscopy systems capable of smFRET, TIRF, 3D particle tracking, super-resolution imaging and live-cell imaging,
- X-ray crystallography (Rigaku Micromax generator and detector with dedicated advanced Multiprobe II robotics, BBSRC funded),
- 2 Waters ion mobility Mass Spectrometers modified with a high mass quadrupole equipped with a nanoAcquity UPLC and the G2Si with a 2D MClass nanoAcquity UPLC, WT supported,
- 1000 CPU computational biology cluster plus resources exceeding 700 CPUs, 300Tb+ file storage etc.

Birkbeck's department of Psychological Science is home to the world-renowned BabyLab, and during this census period its companion Toddler Lab has also been built at a cost of £8.5 Million to date. This new facility comes onstream in 2021.

Earth and Planetary Science is home to the NASA Regional Planetary Image Facility, which plays two fundamental roles, both unique in the UK:

- housing hard-copy and digital planetary data from missions spanning four decades of space exploration;
- providing 3D hardware and software necessary for accessing, processing and analyzing planetary data for internal and external users.

In the census period EPS benefitted from the £28 million refurbishment of the UCL Kathleen Lonsdale Building, a shared facility.



**Institutional level environment template (REF5a)**

The School of Arts houses the The Peltz Gallery, a flexible exhibition space for digital and material displays and small-scale performances and the Birkbeck Cinema, which features 16mm and twin 35mm projectors in addition to high-quality digital projection and is the only cinema in London equipped to regularly show the full historical range of moving image culture (including archival prints and even magic lantern shows).