Birkbeck celebrates research success

A major audit of the UK’s research confirms Birkbeck as a leading research-intensive university

Birkbeck has been ranked 30th in the UK for its research by the Times Higher Education following the publication of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) results in December 2014. This places the College above Russell Group institutions such as Cardiff, Leeds, Liverpool, Queen Mary, Sheffield and York.

The results of the REF – an audit of the quality of research across the UK’s universities – show that 73% of Birkbeck’s research is rated ‘world-leading’ or ‘internationally excellent’ – the top two categories. Of the 14 subject areas that Birkbeck submitted to the REF, half were rated in the top 20 nationally.

Birkbeck’s science submissions performed exceptionally well, with Psychological Sciences rated 5th in the UK and the College’s two joint submissions with UCL – Earth Systems and Environmental Sciences, and Biological Sciences – rated 6th and 11th respectively.

In keeping with the rest of the sector, our research was found to have improved significantly since the last such research assessment in 2008, when 56% of our research was rated in the top two categories.

This sector-wide improvement partly reflects the strategic decision by many universities to submit only their most research-active academics for assessment. Birkbeck submitted 83% of eligible staff to the 2014 REF, well above the national average. This led to the College’s strong performance in league tables which take into account the percentage of staff, rather than just the overall grade point average of research, submitted. Our outstanding subjects in the Times Higher Education’s ‘research intensity’ league tables (published 1 January 2015) include Law, ranked 6th overall (putting it among the top 10 law schools alongside the LSE, UCL, Oxford and Cambridge) and History, ranked 7th.

Similarly, the College performed strongly in league tables based simply on the percentage of research judged to be ‘world-leading’, indicating the very high quality of much of our research.

The 2014 REF put a new emphasis on universities demonstrating the impact of their research beyond academia. Birkbeck’s strong results showed the relevance of the College’s research to many aspects of our everyday lives, whether influencing policy-makers in their thinking about early years education; working with major companies such as Proctor & Gamble to educate parents about their child’s development; or trialling new drugs for the treatment of cancer. In three subject areas – History; Art and Design; and Psychology, Psychiatry and Neuroscience – 100% of Birkbeck’s submissions received the highest ratings for impact.

Professor Stephen Frosh, Pro-Vice-Master Research, said: “Birkbeck’s results show the enormous amount of hard work that has gone on in recent years by our academics. At a time of turmoil in the higher education system, they have continued to produce top-quality research. This also reflects the College’s research strategy, which is deeply committed to creating the best possible conditions for academics to be active in research and to pursue their own intellectual interests.

“As well as celebrating the outstanding performance of some of our top disciplines, it is pleasing that new areas such as Sociology and our reconfigured Modern Languages group did well, reflecting the College’s ability to build new research areas over time.”

During 2014 the College redeveloped its website research pages to showcase the broad scope of our research and its impact under six themes (shown left): arts, history and culture; conservation and heritage; science and biomedicine; politics, society and the law; work and the economy; and learning, education and development.

Nationally, the main purpose of the REF is to determine the bulk of research funding which each UK university will receive between 2015 and 2021. Funding decisions based on the REF results will be announced in spring 2015.

Read more about research at Birkbeck at www.bbk.ac.uk/research and listen to a podcast with Professor Frosh at bbk.ac.uk/birkbeckvoices/episode28