Birkbeck was shortlisted for the Times Higher Education magazine’s prestigious University of the Year 2014 award, and our students voted us number one for student satisfaction in London in the National Student Survey.

The academic year 2013–2014 witnessed the blossoming of many initiatives at Birkbeck, and was an important year for both student recruitment and research. Our achievements, especially the growth of our three-year undergraduate degrees taught in the evenings, were widely recognised. Birkbeck was shortlisted for the Times Higher Education magazine’s prestigious University of the Year 2014 award, and our students voted us number one for student satisfaction in London, in the National Student Survey.

The strength of Birkbeck’s research was also applauded, and the College achieved impressive results in the Research Excellence Framework (REF) – an audit of the quality of research carried out in the UK higher education sector. Above all, while foresight and innovation continue to drive the College’s strategy to adapt to the ever-changing higher education landscape, Birkbeck remains true to its original mission of providing evening university education for working Londoners.

That’s why studying at Birkbeck is both intense and enjoyable – and why it changes people’s lives.

The year 2013–2014 also marked a turning point in the College’s finances as, for the first time, more tuition fee income was received from three-year undergraduate students (£5.35m) than from part-time students studying over four years or more (£5.16m). This development is significant, as student fees and student recruitment-related funding generate 70% of Birkbeck’s income.

The rise of three-year degrees has more than compensated for the decline in part-time student numbers at Birkbeck. Part-time student numbers have declined by 41% at Birkbeck since the government’s withdrawal of funding and the threshold increase in tuition fees in 2012. From being the institution in England most negatively affected by the government’s wide changes in 2012 to becoming the institution with the biggest growth in UCAS recruitment in 2013, Birkbeck has experienced a remarkable transformation.

However, the fall in part-time student numbers means that students who could benefit from part-time study at Birkbeck are not taking up the opportunity of doing so. The College remains committed to such potential part-time students and was one of the main supporters of Part-Time Matters, a national campaign, backed by an alliance of universities, business and unions, to promote the benefits of part-time study.

As well as attracting students because of its evening teaching, Birkbeck’s research-intensive environment is vital for student recruitment, particularly at postgraduate level. The College’s REF results, released in December 2014, were admirable. Birkbeck performed very well in a number of subject areas, particularly Psychological Sciences, rated fifth in the UK, and Earth Sciences and Biosciences, rated sixth and 11th respectively. This recognition from academic peers is the culmination of years of hard work. Following rigorous internal (and in some cases external) assessment, more than 80% of Birkbeck’s eligible academics (that’s over 100 people) were included in the REF submission made at the end of November 2013. The College is also taking action to support the next generation of researchers. Last year, Birkbeck awarded 22 Anniversary Scholarships to support PhD students, and a further round of College-funded PhD studentships will open for applications shortly, this time with a particular emphasis on interdisciplinary and collaborative themes.

Birkbeck’s researchers gained many accolades in 2013–2014 for their contributions to generating new knowledge, and the College has secured many prestigious and valuable research grants (see pp 12–13). In addition, £600,000 of funding was received from the Wellcome Trust for Birkbeck to invest in strategic areas of importance and in public understanding of research.

These are exciting times for Birkbeck, especially as there are many opportunities to work in London with like-minded partners to realise the benefits of higher education. Our achievement in 2016, The Guardian will launch Guardian Space and reopen the Midland Goods Shed at London King’s Cross as a hub for events, activities and courses, with Birkbeck as a key educational partner in this initiative.

The last two centuries have been eventful for Birkbeck and I have no doubt that our future will be as challenging and rewarding as our past. The year 2015 brings with it the removal of government controls on the number of full-time undergraduate students we can admit and the first cohort of new graduates with £27,000 of tuition fee debt, who will be looking for cost-effective methods of postgraduate study.

Beyond 2015, plans are already afoot for our 200th anniversary in 2023. There are many ways in which moving towards our third century may act as a catalyst for a range of interesting initiatives. In the years ahead, Birkbeck will remain ready to respond to the new opportunities and challenges that are certain to appear in the evolving higher education landscape.