

Birkbeck's current position and plans

Note for new Governors

Birkbeck is a world class research institution; a vibrant centre of academic engagement and excellence; and the UK's leading provider of part-time, evening education for mature students. Over the last year, we have transformed our structure and business model and refocused our strategic aims. Through a strategic review we are building on our core academic strengths to take a major stride forward: both in terms of new academic opportunities, focusing on flexible learning; and in terms of efficient organisational and management structures, providing the scope and capacity to operate on a sustainable footing and provide for the necessary investment to move forward.

Our challenge and our opportunity now is to respond not only to financial and external funding challenges, but to maximise our contribution to – and to benefit from – London's changing and growing part time higher education market.

About Birkbeck

Founded in 1823 as the London Mechanics' Institute, Birkbeck was incorporated into the University of London in 1920. As established experts in the field of evening education, we are geared to supporting the needs of students who are managing study alongside careers or other commitments. We encourage students without traditional qualifications and have a wide range of programmes to suit every level. Our academic reputation also attracts many traditional full-time postgraduate students.

There are nearly 19,000 students studying for short courses, certificates, diplomas, first degrees, postgraduate taught degrees and postgraduate research degrees. We teach more than 170 postgraduate programmes, 75 undergraduate programmes and 80 certificates and diplomas.

Demand for our courses has never been higher; in each of the last three years we have seen the highest levels of applications and enrolments recorded in the College. For the past three years, we have been rated by the National Student Survey as first in London for student satisfaction in multi-faculty higher education institutions.

The most recent Research Assessment Exercise (RAE 2008) confirmed our reputation as a world class research intensive institution. We returned over 90% of eligible academic staff and five of our 17 submissions ranked in the top five nationally, 11 submissions had the majority of their work rated as 'internationally excellent' and 'world leading' and all 17 submissions had at least 60% of their research classified as 'internationally recognised'.

Mission

The principal aims of the College, as set out in our mission statement, are to:

- Provide part-time higher education courses which meet the changing educational, cultural, personal and career needs of adults; in particular those who live or work in the London region.
- Enable adult students from diverse social and educational backgrounds to participate in our courses.
- Maintain and develop excellence in research and provide the highest quality research training in all our subject areas.

- Make available the results of research, and the expertise acquired, through teaching, publication, partnerships with other organisations and the promotion of civic and public debate.

A unique role

In pursuing our mission, we have fostered an academic culture that values the synergies between scholarship, research, learning, teaching and professional practice. We have a unique role in the higher education sector, acting as an exemplar of widening participation and flexible learning in a research intensive institution. In particular we make a major contribution to the education of working Londoners, focusing our work in areas where there is need and demand. We are well placed to work with employers and to assist employees who wish to renew or refresh their skills, especially in the current economic climate.

Launched in 2007, our ground-breaking Birkbeck Stratford initiative has brought educational opportunities to an area with some of the country's lowest progression rates to higher education. Working with local educational institutions, we have offered mainly work-based and vocational courses to support regeneration job opportunities which meet the needs and raise the aspirations of local people and employers. Last year we won the Times Higher Education Widening Participation Award for a Stratford-based initiative making higher education available locally for parents from under-represented communities.

We are now planning an outreach programme in North London to bring local people to our central London campus; and will seek out similar initiatives in parts of London with low Higher Education participation rates that are within easy reach of our central London campus.

Key goals and achievements

The immediate backdrop for our strategic review was the government's instruction to the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) to withdraw funding from students studying for an equivalent or lower qualification (ELQ), which resulted in the potential loss of around £8M from our annual budget. But we have also taken the opportunity to place ourselves on a firmer footing to address the challenges that will be faced by the UK higher education sector as a whole over the coming years. We aim above all to build capacity for a further period of sustained expansion – in research and in teaching – at all levels.

Key goals of the strategic review that have been achieved so far include:

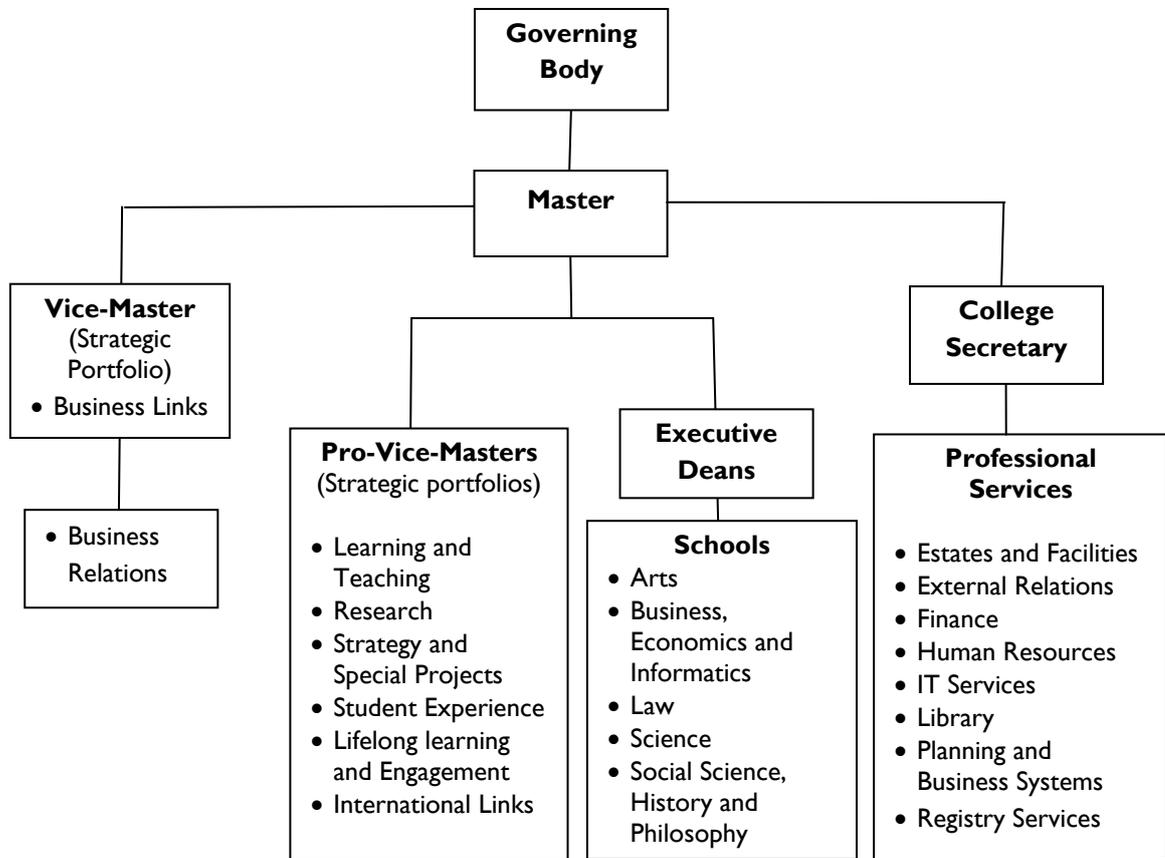
- Refocusing and confirming our strategic priorities in research, teaching, lifelong learning, widening participation, student experience, employer engagement, international links and developments at Birkbeck Stratford.
- Restructuring from 17 to five Schools, each responsible for delivering our overall mission and strategic priorities and each led by an appointed Executive Dean with a dedicated academic management role.
- Mainstreaming the activities of our former Faculty of Lifelong Learning within these new Schools, to offer students opportunities and routes of progression from entry level certificate to PhD.
- Establishment of the MyBirkbeck Student Centre, a “one stop shop” delivering advice and services to create a seamless experience from enquiry to graduation and beyond.
- Validation, through our RAE 2008 results, of our commitment to the maintenance and development of our reputation for research excellence.

In 2009, we were successful in a bid to the HEFCE's Strategic Development Fund for additional funded student numbers to make good our ELQ losses together with £5M of funding to support

the development, expansion and innovation that is necessary for us to achieve our objectives fully.

Structure and resources

Our new structure, launched on 1 August 2009, is set out below.



The criteria for establishing the five new Schools have been academic coherence, financial viability and ability to contribute to strategic growth in all the key areas: linking with the strategic portfolios of the Vice-Master and the six Pro-Vice Masters. We have appointed an Executive Dean to lead each School and, through School executive boards, to be responsible for planning and resourcing the future development of their Schools.

Key challenges

A fundamental aspect of the strategic review has been to address serious funding threats, including poor financial support for part-time students and the withdrawal of ELQ related HEFCE funding. Our forecast income for 2008-09 is some £78M, approximately 50% of which comes from HEFCE funding (two-thirds linked to teaching and one-third to research), 28% from student fees and 15% from research grants and contracts.

Our objective above all is to ensure our long term financial sustainability. As well as substantially increasing our income overall over the next five to ten years, we aim to reduce the proportion of income deriving from HEFCE funding and increase the proportion of income deriving from student fees; to capitalise on income generated by research; and to achieve more efficient ratios of staff to students and of staff costs to overall turnover.

From this autumn, the Executive Deans will lead a major programme portfolio review through which new courses will be introduced and existing ones discontinued on the basis of information on potential income, market demand and employer requirements. We will introduce greater

flexibility in delivery and opportunities for progression, complementing initiatives to improve the student experience and student retention.

A key challenge is for us to make more efficient use of our resources. As our portfolio develops, academic staff will be focused on providing flexible learning opportunities in areas which make an academic and financial contribution to the College, while administrative staff will be deployed effectively to support new and existing developments. We are developing the budgeting and resource allocation systems necessary to operate the new system; an estates strategy to accommodate the new groupings of staff; and wide-ranging business process reviews to maximise our ability to secure value for money and improvements to services.

The governing body

The governing body, referred to in the College as Governors, is collectively responsible for overseeing Birkbeck's activities. Our Royal Charter invests in Governors the authority to exercise the powers of the College, its management and control and the administration of its property and income.

The governing body determines Birkbeck's future direction and promotes the fulfilment of our mission, the advancement of our values and the potential of all our learners. It is responsible for ensuring compliance with the College's constitutional and regulatory framework and takes all final decisions on strategic matters and issues of fundamental concern to the College.

Governors are drawn from within and outside the College, to enable a balanced and broad perspective to be taken in decision making. Independent Governors bring an external perspective and provide specific business, financial, legal, managerial and other skills, while staff and student Governors bring knowledge and experience of academic, collegial and student-centred matters. Governors have set up committees for Finance and General Purposes, Audit, Nominations and Remuneration, to assist them in the consideration of business and to fulfil the statutory requirements of higher education governance.

In 2007 the governing body reviewed its effectiveness and agreed that it would be more effective as a smaller, more focused team, leading to a reduction in the size of the governing body from 33 to 21 Governors in order to promote the focus, teamwork, engagement and scrutiny necessary for Governors to fulfil their collective responsibility for overseeing College activities. Governors also reconfirmed the principles of College governance and the nature of their responsibility for strategic oversight of the College and adopted a code of conduct for governance and a statement confirming the governing body's primary responsibilities.

More details can be found in the Governance and Committees Handbook.

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