The Birmingham Academic

‘Per ardua ad alta’
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The Birmingham Academic Vice-Chancellor’s Foreword

The University of Birmingham is one of the world’s leading universities. Its history as Britain’s first civic university, its glorious campus, its global partnerships, and its outstanding resources define Birmingham as an outstanding institution with an exceptional future. At the heart of the University is a commitment to academic excellence in all its forms: outstanding and inspirational teaching; path-breaking and internationally significant research; and knowledge transfer ranging from our industrial partnerships to our public intellectuals.

The great universities are remarkable places, where academics enjoy the high degree of autonomy that underpins academic excellence. For individual academics and the wider University to thrive, we need collectively to achieve an appropriate balance between curiosity-driven research, publishing research outcomes to maximum impact, and sharing knowledge in ways that benefit society, our economy, and our cultural life. This commitment to research complements rather than compromises our parallel commitment to teaching, creating an outstanding and intellectually challenging learning environment, and offering a student experience second to none.

Given the competing demands on modern academics, balancing these priorities and modelling the rounded excellence we expect must be a collective endeavour. To that end we seek to appoint the best and offer a working environment and career support that matches the best. Having made outstanding academic appointments, the University rightly expects outstanding results. Having chosen to come to Birmingham, you will expect support, appropriate mentoring, opportunities to develop and plan your career, a demanding but balanced workload, and professional services that mirror the excellence of the University’s academic community of scholarship. An academic’s contribution to the research, teaching, and knowledge transfer activities of the University will naturally vary over time, as will the roles he or she plays in leadership within the University. Review of this balance is properly a part of regular appraisal and career development.

This paper sets out our vision of what it means to be an academic at Birmingham, and our commitment to continuing to enhance the University as a destination of choice for the very best and most ambitious academics.

Each section outlines the general characteristics we are looking for and indications of how these characteristics will be demonstrated. Clearly we do not expect new staff to achieve all of these from the outset. But they indicate the way in which we would expect their careers to blossom.

Introduction

This is one of a developing suite of documents which sets out the University's vision for its staff and students. The 'Birmingham Academic' is aimed at Academic Teaching staff – Lecturers, Senior Lecturers, Readers, Associate Professors and Professors – whose duties normally encompass research, teaching and management/administrative activities. Its purpose is to foster and maintain an academic culture of intellectual stimulation and high achievement. It recognises that such a culture is built on shared endeavour and a partnership between academic staff and the corporate body of the University.
Section one:
Research and Knowledge Transfer

The University of Birmingham, as a research-intensive university, is committed to carrying out research that is world-leading in terms of its originality and distinctiveness, significance and rigour. The University’s Research and Knowledge Transfer Strategy emphasises our intention to be recognised internationally for research that is agenda-setting. The transfer of the knowledge and technology generated from our research, and its ensuing impact on the economy, policy, society and environment, is an embedded and natural component of our activity and is as important and relevant as the knowledge generation itself.

We envisage that all academic staff will undertake and produce research of a quality which will meet international standards of excellence and that they will disseminate and transfer the results of that research in modes and forms as appropriate to the discipline.

For individual academic staff, this would be demonstrated by:

1. Regularly publishing research material or producing other research outputs in a form eligible for inclusion in the REF or for equivalent peer review and of a quality that is clearly recognised as internationally excellent in terms of originality, significance and rigour;

2. Fully engaging with the research life of the University and their School and, in so doing, help sustain a strong research culture. Contributions to the research environment will vary between disciplines but may typically include: attracting research income, high quality doctoral researchers and research studentships, winning externally funded research fellowships and attracting distinguished overseas scholars to the School/department; delivery of research seminars; engaging in knowledge transfer activity;

3. Demonstrating, as appropriate to career stage and discipline, the ability to manage research projects/programmes and promoting the training and development of early career researchers and/or research assistants, including mentoring of colleagues, thereby helping them to develop their research skills and to realize their research potential;

4. Supervising doctoral researchers to the timely and successful completion of their research degree studies;

5. Contributing to the development of their field(s) of research activity at national and international level, through, for example, regular presentations at conferences, invitations to give plenary/key lectures, membership of peer review panels, etc;

6. Seeking out and pursuing opportunities to engage directly with external organisations and the public in ways that result in direct transfer of their expertise and knowledge to the benefit of policy makers, businesses and the community, locally, nationally and/or internationally;

7. Ensuring at all times that, in undertaking and transferring their research, they adhere to the highest standards of performance and ethical conduct and embed good practice in all aspects of their work.
Teaching is an essential purpose of any university and is a particularly important mission for a research-led university. It is through our teaching and learning that students acquire the skills, approaches and modes of thought which characterise the Birmingham Graduate. These attributes are developed through a curriculum which is innovative, challenging and engaging and which broadens and deepens the students’ understanding of the nature of knowledge and their capacity to interpret, evaluate and explain. The University’s Learning and Teaching Strategy is informed by the research undertaken by its academic staff and is centred upon an Enquiry Based Learning approach. The Birmingham Experience is intended to equip our graduates to become global citizens who will shape the future through their active contributions to their chosen fields of employment. Our teaching therefore will challenge, inspire and enthuse our students to fulfil their potential.

We expect all our academic staff to undertake a teaching role within the University, thereby passing on their existing and developing research knowledge and understanding to successive generations. Such teaching would normally be delivered at both undergraduate and postgraduate level and include research training and supervision.

For individual academic staff, this would be demonstrated by:

1. Undertaking teaching that is research-led, research-informed and also, where appropriate, research-centred (ie, in which students undertake research), thereby ensuring both that the curriculum is informed by current research practice and knowledge and that it adopts approaches to learning that support the research ethos;

2. Contributing to a student academic experience that is intellectually challenging, inclusive and that helps develop their qualities of leadership, global citizenship and social responsibility and their employability skills;

3. Contributing to, and as appropriate leading, academic modules and programmes, shaping and directing the students’ academic understanding and skills;

4. Providing academic feedback, advice and support to students in an appropriate and timely fashion and form;

5. Contributing to assessment and marking and to the development of assessment modes that challenge the abilities and creativity of Birmingham students;

6. Being innovative in the development of effective teaching and learning and in the use of assessment methods, drawing upon advances in pedagogy, e-learning and emerging teaching technologies to enhance the students’ learning experience;

7. Demonstrating critical self-reflection on their own teaching practice, undertaking and, as appropriate, leading professional development and training in teaching methodology/practice and developing and publishing pedagogic research.
Section three: Academic Citizenship

Academic citizenship takes many forms and is guided by the principle of conscientious and responsible institutional involvement that extends beyond immediate colleagues, students, discipline or university to include obligations to society at large. Good academic citizenship is an essential facet of any successful career, and outstanding and selfless contributions warrant due recognition. Academic citizenship takes many forms, both formal and informal. At a formal level it involves the assumption of leadership and management at an appropriate level, from roles such as examinations officer, admissions tutor and programme director, through to the Headship of a School/Department. More broadly, it includes service as Chair or member of a University-level Committee, Task Force or Working Group, Chair/member of a School Quality Review team, College-level roles such as Director of Education or of Quality Assurance and Enhancement and representing the University on external bodies and Committees. At an informal level academic citizenship embraces responsibilities to colleagues, whether inside or outside the institution, such as helping, nurturing and supporting their work, especially that of younger or newer colleagues. It includes generous, mutually-respectful and supportive working relationships with academic, administrative, technical and support staff. In all, the best acts of good citizenship demonstrate personal commitment towards the best interests of the institution.

For individual academic staff, this would be demonstrated by:

1. Recognising that, in all circumstances, staff are ambassadors for the University of Birmingham and should therefore endeavour, in all fora and personal interactions, to demonstrate the highest standards of corporate responsibility in order to enhance our collective reputation;

2. Contributing to School/College activities such as open days, student welcome, graduation and alumni events and undertaking roles of responsibility within their School and/or College, such as conducting Staff Development Reviews, mentoring probationary staff, and leading, serving on and assisting the work of committees, working parties and panels;

3. Assuming larger management roles within the School, College and wider University such as by serving on committees, task forces, steering groups, working groups and appointment panels as appropriate;

4. Participating in University processes, such as peer observation of teaching, quality assurance and enhancement processes, including annual review and School Quality Review, and preparation for research reviews at School, College and/or University levels;

5. Working in collaboration with professional staff in Colleges and Corporate Services to ensure smooth and effective delivery of administrative processes;

6. Seeking out opportunities to represent Birmingham on national and international bodies such as learned societies, academic and pedagogic journals, and funding bodies;

7. Contributing towards an inclusive community in which diversity is embraced and celebrated.
Section four: Institutional Responsibilities

An effective and successful world-leading University is a partnership between the Institution and its academic staff. Expectations placed on academic staff will be matched by the provision of support to allow individuals to develop their expertise and capabilities and thereby realise their potential, to the mutual benefit of themselves and the University.

The University of Birmingham will demonstrate its commitment by providing:

1. An outstanding intellectual and physical environment that is supportive of all aspects of academic activity, including excellent laboratories, library resources and learning technologies;

2. Efficient, effective and responsive administrative and technical support which, in partnership with academic staff, promotes the academic mission and is aligned to institution-wide needs and priorities;

3. Effective support in the development of individuals’ careers, including provision of appropriate training, mentoring and guidance, regular staff development and performance review and feedback;

4. Purposeful professional development opportunities for academic staff in teaching practice, student support roles, research exploitation and knowledge transfer, and in those academic leadership skills which will enable future University of Birmingham leaders to acquire the management capabilities required of them;

5. Opportunities and encouragement to participate in scholarly activity such as research and teaching and learning conferences, editorial duties and learned societies;

6. Approaches to workload allocation which seek to balance appropriately contributions to the full portfolio of academic duties (eg, teaching duties/student contact hours/knowledge transfer/research time/academic management duties) and provision, where appropriate of sabbatical leave, in accordance with institution-wide policies;

7. Promotion and reward processes which value excellence and ensure that all cases are rigorously, transparently and fairly assessed against clear and consistent policies and criteria which acknowledge and value excellence in teaching, research and other modes of knowledge transfer, and significant contributions to the academic life of the University;

8. Fair policies on equal opportunities, harassment, grievance and disciplinary matters.