Royal Holloway University of London

3-Year Strategic Plan, 2020-2023

The Core Plan

October, 2020

“...I shall take advice from all competent to give it and no effort will be spared to secure the best, and leave it as a great heritage to be carefully maintained by future generations.”

Thomas Holloway, 1875
1. Context

1.1 Pre-Pandemic
The College’s mission of dual excellence in research and education was being successfully delivered as evidenced by the top quartile outcomes for the Research Excellence Framework of 2014 and the overall student satisfaction in the National Student Survey of 2020. The College overall was less strong in measures associated with research impact and knowledge exchange and the employability of our graduates (third quartile on the last Destination of Leavers in Higher Education survey). The College’s financial position was finely balanced, with surpluses running below recommended sector levels, despite year on year student number growth which had been realised as planned (17% over 5 years), through headline improvements in academic rankings, improvements to the Estate, the addition of a strong Law programme and improvements in marketing and recruitment practice. This situation partly reflects the difficulty of dealing with rising costs when the Home student fee has only increased by 2.8% in 7 years. The Council Steer and the Green Paper emphasised the ways in which our size is unhelpful in achieving financial sustainability and out academic ambitions, and placed an emphasis on partnering for scale and reach. The staff survey of 2018 and the industrial unrest of 2018 and 2019 reflect ongoing sector wide academic staff unhappiness on a range of issues as the challenge of long-term financial sustainability is faced. The College has its origins in a key equality issue of the day, and the history is a source of pride. The evidence on the current standing of the College on Equality, Diversity and Inclusion is mixed, and the desire to make these issues more central to the College’s agenda was a message coming through during the development of the Green Paper.

1.2 The Pandemic
The Covid-19 pandemic has created major disruption and uncertainty, including in UK Higher Education. The challenges arising from the restrictions introduced to control the spread of the virus have driven changes in the education we will offer students in 20-21, and has required increased home working for many staff. These changes also present positive opportunities for lasting benefits, for example from different styles of teaching which may yield benefits for student learning. The broader societal impact of the pandemic is only beginning to be understood and will have significant implications for the College in the short and medium term, including around student and staff wellbeing, and research questions to inform public policy responses to social and economic problems that have been intensified.

There is considerable anxiety about a fall in the number of international students coming to the UK in 20-21 and beyond. This has major ramifications for the sector given the cross-subsidy of research from international student fee income. Whilst the growing global demand for higher education gives reasons for optimism, this is balanced by doubts associated with the economic impact of the pandemic and how student perceptions of prestige and safety may change. The competitive response of research-intensive Universities to the threats to their financial position posed by these challenges could have a significant disruptive effect on the sector overall. Relatively small changes in the recruitment of international and home students would move the College’s plans from a position of small surplus to a significant deficit.

1.3 UK Policy Position
Beyond the impact of the pandemic, the UK university sector has moved into a challenging period. Whilst the changes in student finances introduced in 2012 provided an uplift in the unit of resource, the real value has now declined significantly with little prospect of uplift. The public reaction to increasing fees, represented through backbench MPs, has generated an agenda that includes greater focus on the value for money of an undergraduate programme. Because such a concept is hard to measure, the political response (as evidenced in the 2019 Conservative manifesto) has been to focus on graduate earnings. With a view that universities are slow to respond (perhaps because politics and academia work to different cycle times), the Westminster government has become increasingly interventionist, with a new Regulator and an increasing focus on outcomes. In some
cases, this is seen to challenge institutional autonomy and create increasing points of friction between the sector and wider stakeholder community.

The consequence of the policy position is that we need to become more outcome focused, requiring us to address the key issues of value for money for students (particularly employability), the impact of our research and more challenge-led research, and speed and efficiency of how we operate (adapting faster and delivering better).

1.4 Development of a Strategy

The development of a new College Strategy started informally in Autumn, 2019 with a series of visiting speaker events, and formally at the Council Strategy Day in November, 2019. The Council Steer from this strategy day is reproduced below. Responding to the Steer, a Green Paper was produced with input from over 100 staff and students, and this was being used as the basis for a consultation of the College community ahead of the drafting and agreement of the strategy by Council. The consultation was paused following the Covid-19 lockdown in March. With the collective focus of the College on the immediate consequences of the pandemic, and the uncertain and potentially serious impacts on longer term prospects, Council requested the development of a 3-year strategic plan that will allow short term actions to be aligned where possible with a long-term positioning for the College. The development of this plan has been led by members of the College Executive Board along with members of the Council’s Strategy and Governance Committee, and has drawn heavily on the work that went into the development of the Green Paper. The strategy responds to the November, 2019 Council Steer whilst considering the possible impacts of the pandemic on the operating environment. Within the time available, the focus of this plan is on our Education, Research and Financial Sustainability. The strategy has a strong requirement for partnering and this has been brought out, but aspects to do with financial sustainability building on the elements in this current draft, the staff environment and environmental sustainability are in development and will be the subject of work in the Autumn towards an updated strategy early in 2021.

Steer for the Development of the New Strategy

- Inspired by our history, we will celebrate and build on our dual excellence in “Education and Research for the public good” and our highly-ranked community for students and staff.
- The new strategy should give particular emphasis to
  - modernising our Education and Student Experience in light of demographic changes and the rapid transformation of the job market, challenging attainment gaps, and the potential for innovation.
  - establishing the intent and infrastructure to substantially increase the outcomes from Challenge-Led Research and Knowledge Exchange, drawing on our strengths in investigator-led Research.
- The success of the new strategy will be enabled by
  - a substantial increase in scale and reach, facilitated by growing our traditional student base, developing our online capability to deliver an excellent education, and entering into new partnership arrangements.
  - an agile, open and outward looking culture, with a particular emphasis on partnering.
  - new thinking on the staff environment, Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Environmental Sustainability.

College Council, November, 2019
2. Ambitions

2.1 Academic Ambition

As an institution we are ambitious to cultivate an inclusive environment which supports excellence in teaching, research and student experience. Our growing success in both research and teaching is evidenced by our place in the UK top 20 universities. Our primary model as a traditional campus-based university has been tested during the pandemic, and the rapid and successful transformation that we have achieved means that we approach the future with confidence. Central to our dual excellence in research and teaching is our investigator-led research and our provision of a supportive community for students. The ambition of this plan turns these strengths to the expanding opportunities of our proximity to a World City, and from the digital revolution. We commit to fully realising our potential by adapting our education and partnerships to provide more opportunities for the growing number of diverse students from London, to secure routes into the College for overseas students, and to the increased opportunities provided by a growing demand for innovation and insight derived from Research. Fully engaging with these agendas will enable us to impact more fully on the world in positive ways from the impact of our research discoveries and expanded opportunities for students to realise their potential, and to re-define our civic influence on our our region. We recognise the need to make Equality, Diversity and Inclusion a central part of our efforts to realise this future.

This changing focus will require us to develop in new ways. We will draw on the strength provided by the breadth of our current disciplines, and we will grow into new areas to meet the needs of a more diverse student body. While the excellence of our researcher-led discoveries remain key to our success, we must also bring together teams in new configurations to enable new outcomes. We look to a bright future as a research intensive University, operating with the highest academic standards and ingenuity, and with an international outlook in the region to the West of a World City. This future will meet the intellectual and social requirements of the students of our modern times, reflecting the founding vision of the College.

The Founder believes that the education of women should not be exclusively regulated by the tradition and method of former ages; but that it should be founded on those studies and sciences which the experience of modern times has shown to be the most valuable, and the best adapted to meet the intellectual and social requirements of the students.

Deed of Foundation, 1883

2.2 Financial Ambition

Financial sustainability underpins our ambition for dual excellence, and the low and declining surplus before the pandemic was undermining this ambition. This manifests itself in changing staffing levels, lack of investment for academic initiatives, a physical Estate whose overall condition and capacity is inadequate and a digital Estate that does not realise the potential of technology and data. We have been sustained in recent years by the student number growth achieved, which has been crucial to the College’s prospects. This plan considers how we can secure future income, enabling an annual 6% surplus to be generated. Investment in these sources of income will be required to achieve this.
3 The Core Plan

3.1 Benefiting from the London Demographic Upturn

Demographic trends mean that there will be around 30% more 20 year-olds in London in 2031, compared with an increase of 4% in the rest of the UK. In recent years the College’s Home undergraduate recruitment has shifted towards London, and in the academic year 19-20, 39% of our Home undergraduate students were from London, compared with 29% in 15-16. Our location in an area of strongly growing demand for Higher Education provides a very significant opportunity.

The College’s Home intake has grown by 21% over the last 5 years. There are a variety of dynamics underlying this headline figure, including the successful launch of a Law degree to counter declines in some other subjects. One key factor has been that the number of students coming through the Clearing and Insurance routes now stands at 27%, and there is a weakness in this growing dependency on students who did not make us their initial first choice. The students joining the College this year have the most varied spread of prior attainment we have seen. The successful launch of the Foundation Degree programme in 2019-20 points to the popularity of the College for these aspirational students, who are increasingly coming from West London.

The London student market has some distinctive features. Whilst the national population of 20 year olds is 87% white outside London, it is only 47% white in London. This difference underpins a distinctive pattern of subject choices, more skewed to professional subjects, by London students, and in the preferences towards a stronger flavour of employability within disciplines. More than half of our students from West London are commuter students. This group has a distinctive set of requirements for a student experience, from transport needs, to short term accommodation, catering, study space, timetabling, on-campus and remote study options, and student society needs. Our community will need to develop to incorporate more fully students with these requirements alongside those with more traditional residential needs. There are profound and important questions about the elimination of awarding gaps for students from particular backgrounds and how to build on and adapt our approach to student wellbeing for a more diverse study body who are studying in different ways.

An immediate and a long term expanded effort in partnering to support recruitment from London is needed, ranging from an broader set of relationships with Schools, sixth form Colleges and Further Education Institutions. Relationships with other Higher Education providers would provide opportunities to strengthen a more specifically vocational flavour to some degrees. Alliances with selected local authorities would give the College a high profile as an anchor institution in those areas, engaging with a range of educational and innovation needs. Strategic relationships with Businesses are needed to support the employability agenda.

Actions will position us to benefit from the demographic opportunity in London. The ambition is to modernise our offer in all relevant ways to create a rich environment which fully serves the educational needs of a diverse student body drawn from London, the rest of the UK and Overseas.

Routes for International Students

It is well documented that the English speaking Western countries have seen a boom in international student numbers over the past two decades, driven by development in China, India and elsewhere. This has created a strong international dimension to our academic and professional effort, and has had positive implications for University finances. The growth in certain countries in the number of middle class households is a very important driver for continuing demand for a Higher Education in the UK, countered by the growth in capacity and prestige of local Universities. To add to this, there are significant geo-political tensions with China, creating uncertainty over the flow of international students to the UK. The influence of the pandemic remains uncertain, but beyond the short term barriers to travel and concerns over safety, it may be that perceptions of prestige will change to the West’s disadvantage. On balance, international students will likely remain an important element of UK education.
University academic and financial planning, but we should be prepared to compete harder to attract students, based on the quality and flexibility of what we offer.

Royal Holloway attracts a significant number of international students. Around 19% of our income comes from the fees of students from outside the EU. The proposition that we offer is attractive, and is based on prestige arising from our academic strengths and ranking, our beautiful campus, proximity to London and excellent transport connections. To balance this, we have a portfolio at postgraduate level that must support recruitment more strongly, and some of the routes into the College for international students are under-developed. These routes match entry to College degree programmes with previous study. A more attractive postgraduate offer will draw together a more professionally focussed portfolio, the advantages that programmes based at the Central London campus can draw from their location, and a stronger focus on the experience and success of PGT students. For example, pathway programmes offered at pre-degree level and run on-campus by private providers are a significant way that English language and academic levels can be raised to allow entry to a degree programme. Royal Holloway’s pathway programmes, with the private provider Study Group, have significant potential to grow, with the untapped potential being around one third of our current total international student cohort from all sources. Other examples include articulation from partner Universities, and study for students who use the credit gained at the College for degree awards at their home institutions. The common features of these routes is that they require strong partnering, and an attractive education and student experience. These routes are significant under-developed at the College.

The College also offers degrees in different study patterns to the standard on-campus mode. We have a partnership with Kaplan in Singapore that provides study supported by College academic staff and local tutors, leading to degrees from the School of Business and Management. Our University of London distance operation offers four degrees, with study supported either online or by University of London accredited Teaching Centres worldwide. Given the uncertainty about future international travel and the role of technology in Higher Education provision, these relationships provide an important opportunity for the College to diversify, and innovate in the way that Higher Education is offered.

Key partnerships to support success with this pillar are with Study Group and University of London, both of which can be transformed into £10m relationships for the College. The Kaplan relationship has the potential to be developed. Articulation and Cooperation agreements with key academic partners are being piloted with 3 institutions in China, for replication in other countries.

The plan is therefore to develop a postgraduate portfolio that supports international student recruitment more strongly, and to establish a successful set of routes into degree level study at the College. The ambition is to maintain an internationally diverse student population as a fundamental aspect of the Royal Holloway community.

Expanding Challenge-Led Research

A key foundation for the College’s success is our research intensity. This enables a key part of the College’s mission, but also provides the underpinning for the education that we offer students and the environment that we offer to staff. The REF outcome in 2014 was an outstanding achievement, and we make a strong commitment to sustaining that standing as a pillar of the College’s future. The REF outcome, however, is not reflected in other inputs to, and outcomes of, research. Whilst the College was ranked 17th for 4* outputs in the 2014 REF, it was ranked 53rd for 4* impact, a position that does not appear to have improved using Higher Education Innovation Fund measures as evidence. Direct income from research grants and the Quality Related grant which is the financial outcome of the REF represents 16% of our overall income, which is not close to covering the costs of our research with the gap made up from international student fees. This situation contributes to the trend around declining surplus, and undermines the research environment directly and indirectly for all staff.
The Johnson government has an emerging agenda that builds on the policy of previous governments. The agenda emphasises the role of innovation derived from research in the country’s future prosperity, with levels of public research and development funding rising against the trend of public expenditure overall as a result. This funding is increasingly directed towards research which has the potential to be translated into innovation. The agenda also emphasises the role that Universities can play through partnering in underpinning the development of their region. There are significant opportunities for attracting the resource to support work that can be influential in the broader society, but there are also significant risks in being marginalised by increasingly well-funded competitors who are working on problems which are not only of potential utility, but also are often at the forefront of intellectual endeavour.

The plan is to develop a number of significant strengths which can catalyse a College wide strength in challenge-led research, leading to very significant Knowledge Exchange derived from research advances, to complement our traditional strengths in investigator-led research, to energise our intellectual environment and to drive regional influence. Four themes have been chosen as the initial priorities, and will be designated Catalyst themes in recognition that these are intended to be influential in stimulating the culture and support processes for challenge-led research more broadly. These themes are (1) Digital Futures in the Creative and Cultural Sectors; (2) Sustainable Places, thriving societies; (3) Advanced Quantum Science and Technologies; (4) Transformative Digital Technologies for a sustainable digital society. The ambition is to create a strength in challenge-led research which is equivalent to our strength in investigator-led research. Our objective is to increase research funding by 25% by 2025. Each of the themes will require key partnering arrangements, especially with business and public sector organisations. The developing network of collaborators for StoryFutures provides an example of the level of ambition of the partnering effort required, and the relationship with the National Physical Laboratory an example where strategic developments of shared staffing and facilities have been made.

3 Completion and Implementation

3.1 What is Missing?
The steer from Council emphasised Partnering, Staff Environment and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion, and Environmental Sustainability. In the limited time available to develop the 3-Year Strategy, and with the urgent financial situation created by the pandemic focussing efforts on the principle sources of income, these have not been developed in this draft. The broader issue of financial sustainability is being formulated for an update to this draft of the strategy for early 2020.

The key need for partnering is central in the Core plan, through the need to partner with London Boroughs and other educational providers, with Study Group, Kaplan and University of London Worldwide, and with industrial partners for the Catalyst Themes. The approach to supporting this partnering effort with a stronger central College function needs to be defined in detail in the action plans for each element. Key partnerships for success with the pillars have been brought out in sections 3.1 to 3.3.

The Staff Environment and staff Equality, Diversity and Inclusion are key for the future of the College. A dialogue on the future staff environment and EDI will be opened towards an updated draft of this strategic plan in early 2021. The Green Paper developed ideas on a number of topics for the consultation, including about the junior staff environment, workload and the balance between research and education, senior academic leadership responsibilities, promotion criteria and flexible working. These topics will be picked up for consultation. Student EDI is central to the core plan on London student recruitment, and will be given a high profile in this element.

The Green Paper section on Environmental Sustainability was developed by an engaged group of staff and students. This group will be reformed to work out additional content for an updated draft strategy for early 2021, addressing how Environmental issues should feature prominently in our education and research, and how the environmental impact of our operations should be reduced. It is noted that Environmental Sustainability is a
central part of two of the Catalyst Themes, and some of the changes to working patterns in response to the pandemic may support more sustainable operations in the future.

3.2 Responsibilities
The overall responsibility for the implementation of the 3-year strategy is held by the Principal. Implementation of the elements of the Core plan will be led by the members of the College Executive identified below. Executive Board meetings, which include the Heads of School, will be used for reporting and coordination, with regular updates provided to Council and its committees. The implementation team responsible for each element is as follows, with others co-opted as required:

**Benefiting from the London Demographic Upturn**: James Knowles (Lead), School Education Directors, Director of Student and Academic Services, Chief Marketing Officer, Director of Student Recruitment.

**Routes for International Students**: Ken Badcock (Lead), Director of Student Recruitment, Heads of School – SBM and EPMS, Director of Student and Academic Services.

**Expanding Challenge-Led Research**: Katie Normington/Ken Badcock (Lead), School Research Directors, Director of Research and Enterprise.

The first task of the implementation team is to turn the descriptions above into action plans which can form the basis of coordination by Executive Board and oversight by Council. The named leads will ensure that the 3-year strategy implementation is fully integrated within the College planning, including the realignment of School and Professional Service plans where necessary. The draft implementation plan and a set of KPI’s will be defined for consideration by Council at the Strategy Day in November.