

Colleagues,

1.1 I am writing to you about what is, quite understandably, a contentious issue but I ask that it be discussed in a collegial and constructive manner. As everyone will probably be aware, the College has been considering possible changes to WAM weightings for introduction in the 2020/21 academic year. This has necessarily been a slow process, since there are several variables that have to be considered when proposing changes, but at the same time this ensures that there is plenty of space to discuss possibilities and that everyone understands the direction of travel. I have already received some interesting ideas and I am sure that more will be forthcoming.

1.2 Reconsideration of WAM values is necessary right now since new software is being introduced and the scheme shifted from the current 900 points to 1000 – please note that this does not represent an increase in the total work expected but simply a different way of counting. A primary objective in this review is to ensure that proper weighting is given to Education and the full range of support activities that underpin Education. For too long Education has played Cinderella, but the advent of the TEF, which might be compounded by subject-level TEF, ensures that Education must receive just as much attention as Research, and arguably more in view of its significance in our finances and for our standing in the national league tables that drive Home UG recruitment. At the same time it is also necessary to reflect on how support is provided for Research: we urgently need to increase our grant income and reflect on how we manage the growing level of “unfunded” research time.

1.3 Education is an area where the activities and demands are constantly evolving, not least because of the stream of external demands. It is recognised that some of the values in the current College WAM need to be adjusted to take this into account and the changes we are considering are not intended to add to individual workloads but to give proper recognition to what colleagues are currently doing.

1.4 This issue of the Research element in the WAM has raised considerable concerns and some misunderstandings, so that I am writing to set out why the College believes that change is necessary. Whether adjusting the WAM is the best way to secure the desired result is an open question: we have already received some alternative suggestions that might be more radical in their effects. In some quarters the changes have been seen as an attack on research or a betrayal of the research-intensive ambition of the College or University: they are not, but rather constitute a proactive response to changing external factors in order to sustain our research activity and ensure that the College WAM accurately reflects the nature of the academic workload.

1.3 The timeline is that the College Change Management group and the College Board are currently considering various possibilities. Once a set of proposals has been agreed, which will be by the end of March, the proposed new values will be discussed more widely during April and early May while further detailed testing is also carried out. On the basis of this, a final decision will be taken by College Board at the end of May to permit testing of the new WAM software, preparation of data and training of Professional Service staff to take place by the end of August

1.4 I take full responsibility for this initiative: as you are aware, I am approaching retirement, but I see it as my duty to launch difficult discussions rather than bequeath them to my successor.

2.1 Teaching and Research. For the past 25 years UK universities have been increasingly driven by the imperative of RAE/REF success. Results are trumpeted on university websites as proof of quality, the THE constructs various league tables and REF issues play a major part in recruitment and promotions decisions, but it is worth reflecting on the traction that the outcomes actually have. RAE/REF results have never directly influenced any of the international league tables and it is difficult to argue that they have any significant indirect impact, while nationally REF only contributes to one of the major league tables (The Times), and even then only to a limited extent. Thus, REF performance does not contribute to the rankings that are the prime determinants of our recruitment of the majority of our students. By contrast, the TEF and through it the NSS constitute important elements

in the national league tables, especially the Guardian and The Complete University Guide, that influence applicants' perceptions of institutions. There will come a time when a forward-thinking institution recognises what determines reputation and income, as Warwick did with the RAE in the 1990s, and rebalance its priorities. Birmingham prides itself on being a pioneer and should grasp this opportunity rather than wait for others to take the lead.

2.2 Finance provides another lens through which to consider the balance of research and education: in CAL last year education provided £59m (79%) of our income as opposed to £4.5m (6%) from QR (the Quality-Related money that is distributed to institutions on the basis of performance in research assessments). The Office for Students (OfS) is making increasingly loud noises about cross-subsidies, between modes as well as areas of activity, while students do not place research high on their list of priorities when selecting an institution. As a result, it is difficult to see how the current level of cross-subsidy from education to facilitate unfunded research can be sustained. It is also the case that this underfunding leads institutions to rely increasingly on non-established teachers, whose precarious situation is, rightly, a matter of concern.

2.3 Universities receive funds for research from two main sources: grant income from bodies such as RCUK, charities, the ERC and other international funders on the one hand, and on the other QR. The balance between these two elements has been shifting: whereas in 2001 QR delivered to universities four times the funding they received from RCUK, this ratio is now about 1:1 – that, obviously, does not take into account grant income received from sources other than RCUK, so that the importance of grant income to institutions is very substantially greater than QR. Currently in the College we receive an average of £10k of QR for each research-active colleague, a sum that now covers about 17% of the full employment costs of a lecturer at the bottom of the scale and about 8% for an average professor. If one goes back to 2010, the salary coverage in CAL provided by QR ranged from roughly 26% for an entry-level lecturer to about 14% for an average professor. It would be foolish to imagine that this reduction in coverage will not continue, and perhaps accelerate in the list of the financial outcome of REF 2021.

2.4 Administration has deliberately not been factored into the above calculations. The majority of administrative activity supports Education and so could be considered a charge against that income stream, whereas administrative activity that is related purely to research, e.g. the R&KT office, would only increase the underfunded element of research if this were factored in.

2.5 One objection to changing the basic WAM allocation for Research is that this runs counter to the University's strategic objective of creating a "fizz" for research, will affect our standing in international tables, and damage the recruitment of international PG students. These are valid concerns, but it is worth bearing in mind that the University has the strategic objectives to create "fizz" in both Research and Education, with the latter ambition being affected by the current undervaluing of Education. In Education we know what excellence and excitement are when we encounter them, but they are notoriously difficult to measure, whether for internal purposes or in national exercises. We pride ourselves on the intertwining and cross-fertilisation of research and education, but at the same time many of us will be familiar with a discourse of "relief" from the "burdens of teaching", which positions it, intentionally or otherwise, as a second-class activity. A few of the responses to our current thoughts come close to disparaging our educational activities. Excellent teaching is very hard work, just as excellent research is: both need to be recognised appropriately in all contexts.

2.6 With regard to Research "fizz" and reputation, there is no necessary correlation between these and a specific percentage of time reserved for Research: in the STEM colleges, the basic allocation for Research in the WAM is 15% or less in the expectation that grants will provide the main support. Standing in international league tables is determined to a considerable extent by citations and research reputation, with the activities most likely to raise our profile being the organisation of major international events, the production of substantial research outputs of the very highest quality, more international collaborations and greater numbers of distinguished visitors. Consideration is being given to how the first might be recognised through the WAM. In a number of disciplines the second depends on securing grants to construct the research teams that can tackle major questions. While it is accepted that there are disciplines where the main need for the very best research is time, hence a

WAM allocation plus study leave, we need a system that incentivises the production of world-leading research and does not encourage colleagues constantly to produce a plethora of less significant pieces. Grants are needed to underpin substantive international collaborations and it is the combination of such collaborations and world-class outputs that are most likely to attract the most prestigious and interesting visiting scholars. We had hoped that annual discussion of the five-year research plans would help to focus energies on the most significant work, but this has yet to produce significant results.

3.1 The current CAL WAM allocates a standard one third of time to research, a proportion that rises to over 42% if a single term of research leave over a sabbatical cycle is factored into the calculation. There is, therefore, a considerable gap between the funding that we receive for research and the amount of time that we allocate to it. Part of that gap can, and should, be covered by the notional transfer of Education income to the Research account, since a Russell Group institution prides itself that its educational offerings are based on and enriched by its research. There are, however, limits to what the OfS is likely to accept and the progressive reduction in QR will only exacerbate the position.

3.2 It is essential that we increase our grant income. This is in line with the University's target to increase research income per academic FTE, a metric that will become increasingly important in Compact discussions. The Birmingham 2026 strategy envisages that 40% of the University's income will be provided by research, an annual target of £340m; for CAL our annual target for research grant awards in 2026 is £20m, over double the current level. We will not achieve this by relying on current grant winners increasing their success rates: we need to double the proportion of colleagues who are pursuing grants.

3.3 This is supported by figures for current activity. Over the past year over half the academics in CAL were inactive in grant terms (no applications, no current awards), in contrast to only 17% of academic staff in the STEM colleges. This might indicate that too many colleagues in CAL find it too easy to pursue their research without putting in the hard work needed to win grants. If we are to sustain Birmingham's ability to support a vibrant research culture, we need to change the way we behave to a considerable extent; in particular we need to decrease the percentage of research activity that is unfunded and increase that supported by grants.

4.1 The College's initial proposition is a decrease in the basic WAM allocation for research from one third to one quarter while increasing allocations for grant submission, on a sliding scale related to size of grant, and for certain other research-related activities that we would like to encourage, e.g. journal editorship. A WAM allocation of 25%, which is the current proposal, would still leave a significant unfunded element, since, once a sabbatical term of leave is factored into the calculations, it will still be the case that over one third of time is allocated to research across a sabbatical cycle. This proposal would mean that academics who engage energetically in grant capture would have something close to the current one third of time allocated to research, with sabbatical leave on top - and, of course, if their grant applications succeed, they will have more time. We do recognise that early career colleagues do not have the same ability to apply for larger grants as more established colleagues, so that we will not be proposing any change to the one-third research allocation for colleagues while on probation and in certain other categories.

4.2. College Board has received some constructive alternative suggestions that we are considering. For example, the money distributed to Schools for Personal Research Allowances might be aligned with the School's Transparent Accounting position, with individual amounts normally varied in line with the person's grant activity in the previous year or years. Award of study leave might normally become dependent on the submission of grant applications in the preceding years, or dependent on the acquisition of grant income; in this scenario grant-writing would be regarded as an essential element of research activity within the basic WAM allocation and so would not be considered as grounds for leave. Promotions cases might normally be required to demonstrate grant income (not just applications), recruitment of international PGR students and innovative educational contribution. In each scenario there would be exceptions to reflect individual circumstances, for example

outstanding pedagogic innovation or the production of "lone scholar" 4* work, but for the majority of people expectations would change.

4.3 A different response has been that nothing needs to be done, since the university is in strong shape financially and no other Russell Group institution is taking such steps. Inaction, however, is not an option for us. The 2017/18 College Transparent Accounts (TRAC) revealed a significant reduction in the balance between income and expenditure across the College, from 93.6% coverage in 2016/17 to 85.2%, whereas the minimum target is 90% and the ideal over 100%. The only School currently above 90% is the Law School (104%). This reduction was not a surprise, since it was primarily caused by the significant recruitment of new staff that now needs to be balanced by commensurate increases in income. The shortfalls in overseas students in 2018 mean that the 2018/19 will probably be somewhat weaker and the challenge greater. The three main ways in which the gap can be reduced are to increase student recruitment, especially of international and PG students whose fee levels we control, to raise grant income, or to reduce costs, of which academic salaries are by far the largest single element. We already have challenging targets for international student recruitment in an increasingly competitive environment; no-one believes that balancing the books by cutting staff numbers and increasing SSRs is a desirable response. Therefore, incentivising grant capture is in the interests of all of us.

5. This is a long message, but that is because it addresses issues of the utmost gravity. Thank you for reading to the end and for reflecting on the issues.