



# **Strategic Plan for Research Development**

**2014-2017**

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## Executive Summary

### *Strategic Context*

St. Mary's University College is a small, specialist and high performing higher education institution with a distinctive educational ethos. The first priority of the College is the promotion of high quality learning and teaching in teacher education and the liberal arts. This strategy for research has been developed in the context of supporting that priority. The College's corporate strategy, Strategy 21 defines the College priorities and aspects for development. Development action point 14 states, *"Research-informed teaching should continue to be the main focus of the College research strategy."*

The aims of this Strategy have been developed, in part, in the context of the conclusions of The Interim Report of the BERA – RSA Inquiry into The Role of Research in Teacher Education. In particular St. Mary's supports the development of a research-rich, self-improving education system in which teacher educators:

- need to engage with research, in the sense of keeping up to date with the latest developments in their academic subject and on effective instructional techniques to inform their pedagogical content knowledge; and
- need to be equipped to engage in enquiry-oriented practice, which means having the capacity, motivation and opportunity to use research-related skills to investigate what is working well and what isn't fully effective in their own practice.

The role of research in the College's academic provision is also driven to a large extent by the requirements of the Northern Ireland education system. The Department of Education approve all ITE programmes in Northern Ireland. To gain approval programmes must be accredited by the General Teaching Council: Northern Ireland (GTCNI). Approval is also dependent on evaluations carried out by the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI).

The GTCNI accreditation process involves GTCNI determining whether staff in institutions make appropriate references to research, practical applications and the development of relevant skills and competence. Furthermore, there is an expectation that protocols will be in place to ensure that staff draw upon their research, scholarship or professional activity to inform their teaching and the students' learning experiences.

In assessing the effectiveness of learning and teaching in ITE providers on behalf of the Department of Education, the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) consider the extent to which teacher educators draw upon their professional experience, involvement with schools, research and other scholarship to promote and develop student teachers' learning.

St. Mary's is academically integrated with Queen's University Belfast and therefore the University is a key stakeholder with respect to the College's research strategy. The Memorandum of Agreement between St. Mary's and the University sets out the University's expectation with respect to research in the College:

*“The University recognises that the College is committed to raising its research profile to a level which is commensurate with research informed learning and teaching.”*

### *Strategic Approach*

The Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 presents an approach which builds on the foundations that are now in place and are beginning to produce creative and positive results.

One of the St Mary’s research priorities is to develop teaching methodologies and approaches that lead to more effective student and pupil learning, with findings from this work reflected in all stages of teacher education in the College. Other priorities seek to establish high quality research as the norm, embedded in the core work of all academic staff in the College and closely integrated with learning and teaching.

The Aims of the Strategic Plan are:

Aim 1. To increase the level of engagement in research among academic staff and the quality of research outputs produced, strategically building the strength and capacity of the research base:

Aim 2. To ensure that research and scholarship, including original research by staff, underpin high quality teaching and learning and enhance the student experience at St. Mary’s; and

Aim 3. To build capacity among students of teacher education and the liberal arts as the next generation of educators and professionals and to motivate them to disseminate and critically apply research.

The model proposed provides a framework for research development between the years 2014-2017. It reflects the areas of interest, expertise and the current research output profile of academic staff as well as the needs of the College. Research activity in St Mary’s will take place within two academic disciplines – Education and Politics & International Studies and will focus on two themes:

Research Theme 1: Teacher Education and Pupil Learning

Research Theme 2: International Studies

Core actions to be taken include:

- A number of research groupings or centres will be formed
- A number of research active staff will be released from teaching for agreed periods in order to complete agreed research projects
- Academic staff will aspire to a production level of one research publication a year
- Funding for research training will be increased
- Partnerships with schools will be developed to include collaborative work on research.
- Academic staff will submit annual individual research plans
- The administrative framework will be developed to process submissions to the REF following 2014 under two units of assessment – Education and Politics & International Studies;
- Participation by academic staff at research seminars in Queen’s University will be promoted;

- Academic staff will seek to build collaborative links with research partners in other higher education institutions and in particular to build on the College's international networks.

The DEL Higher Education Strategy for Northern Ireland, Graduating to Success, seeks to ensure high quality teaching and learning in a variety of ways but In particular through the work of the Higher Education Academy (HEA). The HEA in turn emphasises the practice of researching and sharing best practice in the sector.

## Introduction

St Mary's University College vision statement, as articulated in *Strategy 21*, provides the underpinning conceptual framework for the Strategic Plan for Research Development. The values and aspirations of the College community are therefore reflected in the Strategic Plan for Research Development. The 2014-2017 strategy builds upon the foundations and progress made in previous strategies. However, it also marks a change in momentum, direction and goals, inspired by a commitment by members of academic staff to undertake purposeful and relevant research, to build a dynamic research base and to further contribute to society by creating and sharing new knowledge in the fields of education and international studies.

St Mary's is academically integrated with Queen's University, a leading, research-intensive university, and this academic partnership influences and supports aspirations for improved performance in research, as articulated in section 6 and appendix 4 of the Memorandum of Agreement, Queen's University Belfast and St Mary's University College 2010-2015.

St Mary's has established a reputation as a distinctive, high achieving institution that has a creative learning environment, serves local and wider communities and also successfully prioritises the student experience. Further progress as a research active institution will enhance these areas of strength, as well as improve overall performance and generate new opportunities.

Staff engagement in research directly influences the relevance and quality of teaching and enriches the learning experiences of students. It sharpens the intellectual practice of academics and enables them to become more critically reflective in their profession. Staff engagement with research offers a model of good practice to students. The skills associated with academic research, applied by staff, are therefore fostered among students at St Mary's. Skills and competences in research practice that are essential for many careers are nurtured and developed. The successful implementation of this strategic plan will require the engagement of all members of academic staff within a supportive, scholarly environment.

This strategic plan for research development over the next four years articulates a commitment from the College to advance its existing research culture and agenda to a higher level in line with Theme 3 of *Strategy 21*. Since the creation and implementation of the previous research strategy 2010-2013, there have been new or further developments that have contributed to strengthening the College's research culture. These developments include: preparing for a submission to REF2014 in the Politics & International Studies Unit of Assessment; financing staff to conduct research fieldwork, disseminate their research at conferences and pursue doctoral research study; an improved writing culture resulting in books, journal articles, book chapters, research reports, etc.; creating new research collaborations with external organisations; and a more productive programme of research seminars in Education and European/International Studies.

Yet, there is still room for improvement to achieve consistent, high level engagement in research by members of academic staff. Successful initiatives, already introduced to encourage active participation in research, will be maintained. Further developments will also seek to establish high quality research as the norm, embedded in the core work of all academic staff in the College and closely integrated with learning and teaching. By striving towards the implementation of this vision for research, St Mary's University College Belfast embraces the challenges discussed in *The Higher*

*Education Strategy, Graduating to Success*, (DEL, April 2012). This vision for higher education in Northern Ireland over the next decade has a focus on quality in teaching and research. St Mary's has a distinctive contribution to make as a member of the higher education sector, aspiring to contribute to change, influence policy and make a relevant impact beyond academia.

Guidelines on future direction for Teacher Education, discussed in *Teacher Education in a Climate of Change* (DEL and DE, 2010), informed the consultation and groundwork which underpinned the development of this Strategic Plan. The implementation of the Strategic Plan will also be informed by the ongoing enquiry by the British Educational Research Association and the Royal Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufacturing and Commerce (BERA and RSA, 2014) into the relationship between educational research and teacher education and how both work to improve outcomes for children and young people. St Mary's research priorities aim to develop teaching methodologies and approaches that lead to effective pupil learning, with findings from this work reflected in all stages of teacher education.

St Mary's Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 provides momentum and a structured framework to support and promote research activity in a more strategic context, addressing Government priorities, also articulated in the Research Agenda document, *Underpinning Success*, (DEL, 2012).

St Mary's strategy also reflects the distinctive ethos, values and the strengths of the College. The Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 is fully aligned with the College's commitment to deliver an enriching and inspiring student experience, keeping students at the heart of our higher education provision.

## **Research Model**

Within the area of Politics and International Studies a coordinated, structured approach to research activity has benefited from impetus and strategic direction during the years of preparation for submission to the Research Excellence Framework. Research activity within the area of Education spans a wider range of levels of engagement and requires clearer connections to niche areas of expertise.

The following model provides a framework for research development between the years 2014-2017. It reflects the areas of interest, expertise and the current research output profile of academic staff as well as the needs of the College. It represents a very natural trajectory for academic staff in St Mary's, including early and experienced researchers.

Research activity in St Mary's takes place within two academic disciplines – Education and Politics & International Studies and will focus on two themes:

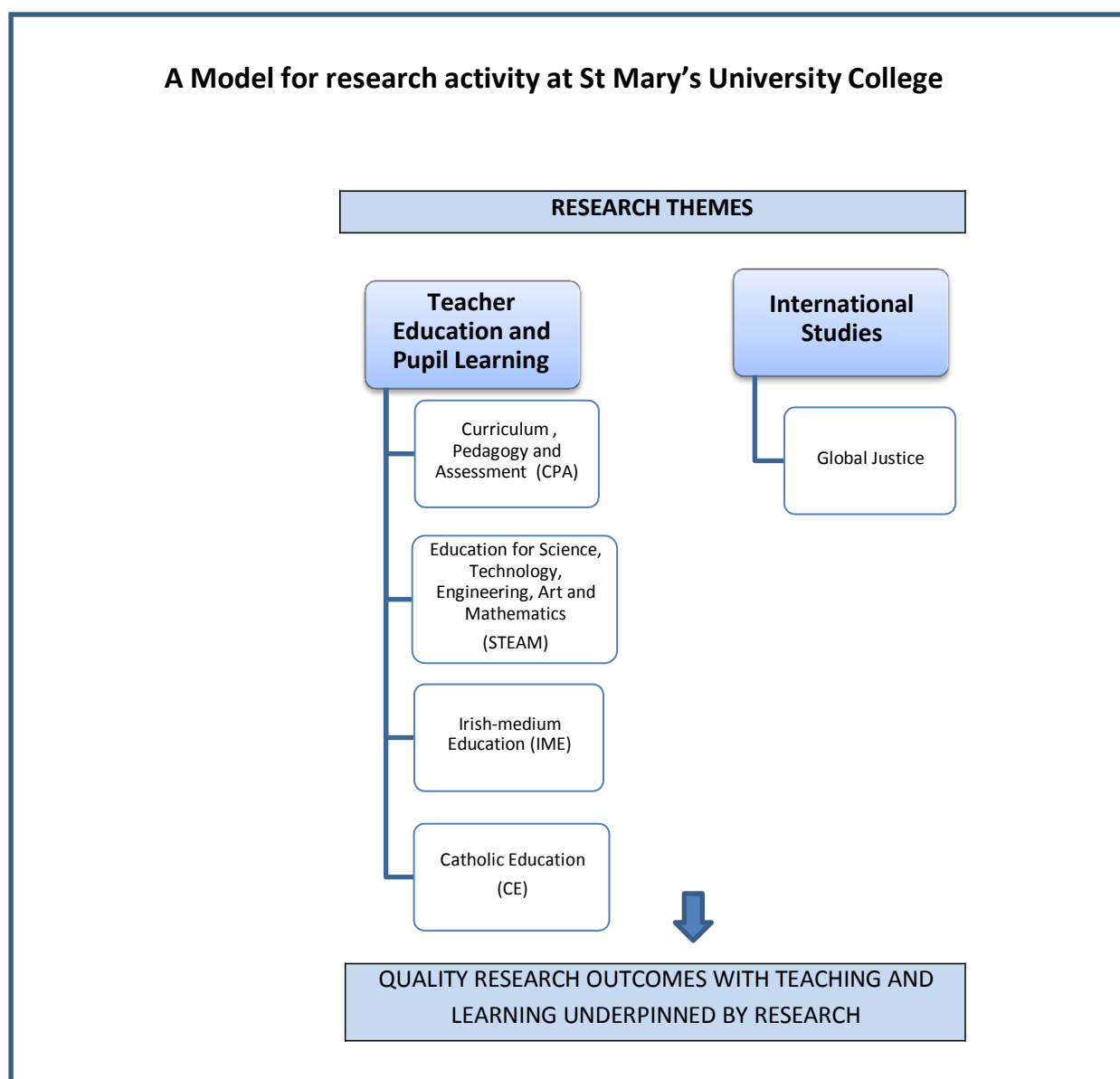
Research Theme 1: Teacher Education and Pupil Learning

Research Theme 2: International Studies

A number of research groupings or centres will reflect the particular research interests of their members, and provide a forum for academic activity in relation to those interests. Staff who become affiliated to one or more of the five associated groupings or centres share the opportunity as a

collective to shape and contribute to the configuration, organisation and programme of activities within each of them. Members of each grouping or centre will take forward their plans in consultation with the Senior Tutor for Development who will coordinate and oversee the implementation of this research model.

At St Mary's, the dynamic relationship between progress in learning and teaching and progress in research and knowledge exchange underpins the Research Strategy and connects it with the Learning and Teaching Strategy. This model is outlined in the following diagram.



Members of academic staff may be affiliated to more than one research grouping or centre. This will be particularly appropriate where, for example, research bridges different areas of expertise. This model facilitates research across themes, increasing the potential for interdisciplinary and collaborative research.



Research in the area of Teacher Education and Pupils' Learning encompasses work across a range of disciplines and curricular areas and seeks to enhance the field of study, the growth of knowledge and critical understanding of issues of contemporary concern and relevance in education.

Research in the area of Global Justice encompasses work in development studies and economic policy; international political philosophy, global ethics and human rights; the cultural representation of minority identities, migration and the exile experience.

The configuration of themes and research groupings or centres, presented in the research model, provides staff with direction, motivation and a supportive network to maximise research outcomes.

Outside of the College model, staff may seek to become involved in a collaborative relationship with Queen's University Belfast, which may offer the opportunity to contribute to a research centre that is more closely aligned with a specific specialism, and to have this work acknowledged.

## **Aims**

The aims of this strategic plan support actions articulated in the Learning and Teaching Strategy, as well as Strategy 21 and other College policies. They are:

**Aim 1** To increase the level of engagement in research among academic staff and the quality of research outputs produced, strategically building the strength and capacity of the research base.

### **Actions associated with Aim 1**

- The framework to support key research specialisms and to give strategic direction to research will be implemented;
- The Research Committee will develop the plan for the next Research Excellence Framework submission;
- Academic staff will submit individual research plans at the end of each academic year to the Senior Tutor for Development;
- A number of research active staff will be released from teaching for agreed periods in order to complete agreed research projects;
- Academic staff will incorporate an impact plan for their research into early planning;
- The administrative framework will be developed to process submissions to the REF following 2014 under two units of assessment – Education and Politics & International Studies;
- The Research Office will liaise with Staff Development to support applications to external sources for the funding of research projects;
- The Research Office will liaise with Staff Development to organise research training opportunities for staff;
- Funding for research training will be increased;
- Academic staff will seek to build multidisciplinary collaborative links with research partners in other higher education institutions and in particular build on the College's excellent international networks;

- Participation by academic staff at research seminars in the Queen's University will be promoted;
- Representation by St Mary's on the SCoTENS Committee will be maintained and participation by staff in SCoTENS research events will be increased.

**Aim 2** To ensure that research and scholarship, including original research by staff, underpin high quality teaching and learning and enhance the student experience at St Mary's.

**Actions associated with Aim 2**

- Academic staff will engage with high quality research that permeates each of the degree programmes;
- Programme Leaders will raise further awareness among all academic staff that academic research will enhance the quality of learning and teaching;
- The College's research output relating to the main research themes will be developed. Academic staff will aspire to a production level of one research publication a year. (Staff at an earlier stage in their research careers may plan a more phased progression);
- Collaborative research by staff with colleagues will be encouraged, extending opportunities for early researchers to gain experience;
- Partnerships with schools will be developed to include collaborative work on research;
- Academic staff will be encouraged to gain experience as doctoral supervisors in accordance with University regulations.

**Aim 3** To build capacity among students of teacher education and the liberal arts as the next generation of educators and professionals and to motivate them to disseminate and critically apply research.

**Actions associated with Aim 3**

- The Research Office and Programme Leaders will consult with the student body to ensure that student achievement, as a result of engaging in research activity, is recognised and celebrated and that dissemination is carried out effectively;
- Programme Leaders will oversee the development of research training and practice for students in dynamic, relevant programmes, equipping students to bridge the gap between research and its practical application;
- Students will be encouraged to participate in research conferences and to present research at St Mary's seminar series;
- Students will be encouraged to submit research papers to academic awards programmes such as The Undergraduates Awards.

## **Roles and responsibilities**

The successful implementation of this strategic plan requires a commitment from all staff and students. The commitments will be implemented by various teams, committees and offices to achieve the aims and objectives of the Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017.

### ***Strategic Management Team***

The Strategic Management Team will fully endorse and be an advocate for the advancement of academic staff engagement in research.

### ***Senior Tutor for Development***

The Senior Tutor for Development will lead the development of research in College, chair the Research Committee and oversee the work of the Research Office.

The Senior Tutor will manage the research budget and ensure that it is used to maximum effect.

### ***Senior Tutor for Staff and Resources***

The implementation of the research strategy will be supported by the Senior Tutor for Staff and Resources in the leadership and management of staff in the academic departments and units, overseeing effective use of resources and fostering a culture that promotes high expectations with regard to teaching, learning and research.

### ***Academic Council***

Academic Council will receive and consider reports from the Research Committee and will consider and recommend to SMT the Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017. The Academic Council will receive an annual report on the progress and implementation of the research strategy from the Senior Tutor for Development.

### ***Programme Team Leaders***

Programme Team Leaders will promote academic staff engagement with high quality research so that it permeates each of the degree programmes.

### ***Course Teams***

Members of course teams will identify appropriate areas of research within the two College themes and will undertake research in these areas. They will submit individual research plans at the end of each academic year to the Senior Tutor for Development. In the medium to long-term they will aim to reach an output level of one research publication per year.

### ***Research Committee***

The Research Committee will engage in implementing the strategic plan and its functions will include further investigating and planning a future submission to the REF beyond 2014. This will involve: developing a strategy for the REF; extending the administrative framework to support the REF process; reviewing the current Code of Practice; consulting with experts on how to achieve research excellence; securing opportunities to deliver staff development with a REF focus; actively engaging with QUB on preparation for the REF; and motivating academic staff to produce research output, create research impact, organise research dissemination events and contribute to a healthy research environment.

The Chairperson of the Research Committee will ensure that research is placed as an agenda item at Academic Council and Academic Board meetings at regular times throughout the academic year to emphasise the need for academic staff's full engagement in research activity and to keep academic staff informed about research development.

The Research Committee will continue with work to introduce a model of specific research groupings or centres, coordinating research activity within a more strategic and structured framework. Each research grouping or centre will be led by a specialist researcher and will create a plan for development. These College research groupings or centres will promote collaborative research activity as well as support individual research related to a centre's focus and to its corresponding research theme.

Members of the Research Committee will continue to improve upon the development of research seminar series in the College by promoting their contribution to a vibrant research environment and encouraging academic staff to participate.

### ***Research Ethics Committee***

The Research Ethics Committee will meet at regular intervals throughout the academic year to review research activity that involves gathering data from participants and to effectively ensure all research is conducted in an ethically appropriate manner. This includes reviewing the Code of Practice for Research and disseminating it among academic staff.

The Research Ethics Committee will advance the Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 by consulting with the staff development officer to organise staff development events on research ethics within a social science framework. These will focus on training specifically for members of its committee as well as concentrating on improving the ethical practices of academic staff engaging in research activity. This will ensure excellence in terms of the governance of research and the quality of practice.

### ***Research Officer***

The Research Officer will act as a central resource in promoting the development of a research culture in the College. He will continue to inform the staff development officer and academic staff of potential training opportunities available at QUB relating to research in higher education. The Research Officer will also investigate other potential providers of research training and will liaise with the staff development officer to enquire about external training opportunities that are

available. The types of training opportunities that will be targeted include: writing successful grant applications; project planning and time management for researchers; writing for publication and dissemination; effectively using the voice for conference presentations; understanding and devising qualitative and quantitative research methods; evaluating the impact of research; engaging with the media on the outcomes of research; and the effective analysis of research data.

The Research Officer will submit an operational plan to the Senior Tutor for Development in June of each year.

A dissemination system will be maintained by the Research Officer whereby academic staff will be informed of the following: opportunities to respond to calls for papers; announcements on applying for research grants; external calls to attend research seminars; ways to engage in staff development activities; potential collaborative research projects; internal research seminars; recent research achievements by staff; and on-line support for research practice.

The Research Officer will also communicate news about achievements of academic staff engaged in research.

The Research Officer will complete an annual research report outlining the research activities of academic staff and will consult with the Chairperson of the Research Committee to review the progress and the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Research Development on an annual basis.

The Research Officer will continue liaising with administrators at the Higher Education Funding Council for England and the Department for Employment and Learning Northern Ireland on the process of submitting to the REF and will coordinate the current and future submissions by the College.

The Research Officer will provide support and guidance on identifying and completing research funding proposals, will assist academic staff as much as possible in conducting funded research projects and will disseminate details of academic staff's research activity via the research section of the College website.

The Research Officer will continue to process applications to the College's research budget and will liaise with the Chairperson of the Research Committee and the College's Finance Department in relation to the specific ways the budget can be utilized to provide assistance to academic staff.

The Research Officer will confer with the Chairperson of the Research Committee to develop and maintain relationships with research bodies or appropriate research branches of organisations such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA), Political Studies Association (PSA), General Teaching Council for Northern Ireland (GTCNI), GuildHE, Political Studies Association of Ireland (PSAI), British International Studies Association (BISA), International Studies Association (ISA), Standing Conference for Teacher Education (SCoTENS), Teacher Education Advancement Network (TEAN), and the Higher Education Academy (HEA).

The Research Officer and the Research Committee will devise structures that support early-career researchers to work collaboratively with more experienced researchers in the College.

## Conclusion

Progress on the implementation of the Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 will be reviewed annually to ensure that it appropriately meets the evolving needs of the College and the external environment.

The successful implementation of this strategic plan will require commitment by all academic staff. It will be led by a number of teams, in particular the College Research Committee and the Research Ethics Committee. They will be guided by relevant College and University policies. The Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 will be monitored against a range of indicators. These include the following:

- Levels of academic staff's engagement with research activity and the range and quality of research output;
- Collaborative research initiatives undertaken or led by academic staff;
- Participation in dissemination events by academic staff and students;
- Engagement in staff development supporting research activity;
- Number of research funding applications;
- External funding levels;
- Growing evidence of research impact case studies.

It is acknowledged in the 2013 *Report on the Implementation of Strategy 21*, that a more strategic focus is needed to strengthen the research environment and research infrastructure in the College. The generation of revenue from research remains a goal that can only be achieved when solid foundations for building research capacity are well established.

The Strategic Plan for Research Development 2014-2017 presents a balanced approach for building on the foundations that are now in place and are beginning to produce creative and positive results, and which requires, vision, hard work and a commitment to a sustainable future for St Mary's University College.

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