

Institution: Stranmillis University College, Belfast

1. Context and mission

Stranmillis University College, Belfast is a small, specialist HEI. It was founded in October 1922 to provide state-funded teacher training for Northern Ireland following partition in 1921. A close relationship with Queen's University, Belfast (QUB) was established from the outset: the College was built on a site procured from QUB and with W J McCallister, Professor of Education at QUB, as its first principal. More recently, since the introduction of the B.Ed. degree in the 1960s the College has had a validating agreement with QUB. In 1999, the College was granted University College status by the Privy Council and uses the title 'Stranmillis University College: A College of The Queen's University of Belfast'. Stranmillis is one of four HEIs currently providing Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland (the others being QUB, Ulster University and St Mary's University College).

The College is an autonomous institution in ethos, governance and finance. It has been an incorporated body since October 2005. It is accredited by the Department of Education (NI) as an institution providing courses of Initial Teacher Training leading to eligibility to teach and is funded by the Department for the Economy. The College is subject to the Quality Assessment Operating Model. Following a Quality Assurance Agency Quality Review Visit in 2017-18, it has been confirmed as an Established Provider.

Under the terms of the current Memorandum of Agreement with QUB, the University has ultimate responsibility for the academic quality and standards of all programmes in the College which lead to its awards. Students enrolled in the College on QUB degree programmes are registered as students of the University for the purpose of achieving academic awards, and come under the authority and discipline of the University in academic matters (though under the authority and discipline of the College in non-academic matters).

The College currently offers 4 undergraduate degree programmes as follows: B.Ed. Primary, B.Ed. Post-Primary, B.A. Early Childhood Studies, B.Sc. Health, Physical Activity and Sport. The College also offers a one-year PGCE programme in Early Years, and three M-level programmes (M.Ed., M.A., M.Teach.) as well as a wide range of CPD and Lifelong Learning courses. There are currently 859 full-time undergraduate students, 141 part-time undergraduate students, and 176 on part-time M-level courses.

In terms of research, and in line with wider moves to develop and consolidate the role of research within teacher education (e.g. BERA/RSA, 2014) the College has been on a developmental journey over the past 15-20 years and especially since 2014, culminating in the launch of the College's first research centre in 2018. The College made small submissions to the RAE in 2008 and REF2014. Following the RAE, a research office was established for the first time with the appointment of a middle management post of Head of Research Development supported by a research office administrator. A total of 5 academic staff were returned to REF2014 and results were encouraging: 72% of the College's research activity was ranked at 3* or above, with 40% of research outputs ranked at 4*.

There has been considerable growth in the vitality and sustainability of the College's research activity since 2014 (see REF5b) which can be attributed to the College's strategic commitment to

and investment in the development of research. For instance, in the Corporate Plan 2018-2021, the Mission of the College is expressed as follows:

“Transforming the lives of children, young people and communities, through excellence in teaching, scholarship and research”

The development of impactful research is also a key strategic priority of the 2018-2021 Corporate Plan:

*“Focus scholarship and research to inform teaching, shape policy, change practice and inform debate:
- increase high-quality research and scholarly publications which will ensure a successful REF submission
- increase research grant income, with a particular focus on developing and sustaining a Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement”*

This strategic focus is reflected in managerial practice as all academic staff now have at least 10% of their workload model contractually allocated towards scholarship/research, while for staff with Significant Responsibility for Research (SRR) a 20% workload allocation is granted.

Given the historic mission of the College in terms of teacher education, and commensurate with the continued predominance of education degree programmes, research and scholarship activity is also necessarily focused on education. In this REF exercise as in RAE2008 and REF2014 the College will make a single Unit of Assessment submission under Education (UoA 23).

There has also been a greater focus on student research activity in recent years. Since 2015 all undergraduate students complete a compulsory research dissertation in their final year, and all PGCE students undertake a compulsory research study. A student research conference has been held annually since 2016. The increase in student enrolment at Master’s level since 2014 has also led to more high-quality M-level research dissertations. This, along with the growth of research capacity by academic staff, has fuelled the College’s aspiration to develop its own doctoral programme (not permitted under the current Memorandum of Agreement with QUB, though College staff may act as co/second supervisors on QUB research degrees). Negotiations with QUB around the development of a Stranmillis doctoral programme have begun.

Finally, in terms of situating the REF submission, it is important to note that the College’s research activity is situated within the unique political, social and economic context of Northern Ireland. Over 20 years since the signing of the Good Friday Agreement, Northern Ireland is still marked by the legacy of over 30 years of conflict, and had no government for almost half of the current REF period (Jan 2017-Jan 2020) as a result of political tension between the two main Executive parties. The absence of political decision-makers for 3 years inevitably led to a period of policy stagnation which also hindered the efforts of researchers to influence government policy and to secure government funding for research. This “post-conflict” society is also reflected in an education system still defined largely by community/religious/political identity and by high levels of social deprivation and educational underachievement: Northern Ireland has higher levels of multiple deprivation than the rest of the UK with over a third of the population living on or below the breadline (Poverty and Social Exclusion 2020), while a long tail of educational underachievement, especially among Protestant working class boys, has been highlighted in many reports (e.g. ETI, 2018; Henderson et al., 2020) Most recently, the post-Brexit climate has seen an increased tension in north-south relations and growing uncertainty about future economic and political relations with the rest of the UK and Ireland.

2. Strategy

As a single UoA submission, there is one single Research and Scholarship Strategy for Stranmillis University College which is discussed in more detail in REF5b.

In summary, however, there has been considerable growth and development in the research culture at Stranmillis during the current REF period. This has ensured that the strategic goals for research and impact identified in REF2014 have been taken forward with much success to date and a clear vision for future development over the next five years.

In terms of *developing a sustainable and ethical research culture*, a series of key staffing appointments have been significant in building a sustainable research culture at Stranmillis: including a new Senior Leadership post of Director of Research and Scholarship in January 2015 (Purdy – who reports 3 times a year to the Governing Body), a new post of Research Office Finance and Development Officer in April 2015 (Shields), a new post of Research Impact Coordinator in August 2015 (Walsh), and most recently the appointment in 2019 of a full-time Research Fellow (Harris) to the College's *Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement*, established in 2018. The appointment of a Director of Research and Scholarship reflects the College's commitment to developing a sustainable research culture (a key element of successive College-wide Corporate Plans), and led to the development of a comprehensive new Research Strategy in 2015, revised and updated in 2017 and 2019 (and detailed in REF5b). A new *Research Code of Ethics in Research* and accompanying *Regulations Governing the Allegation and Investigation of Misconduct in Research* were also instituted in November 2015 and updated in February 2018, providing clear guidance for staff/student researchers. A thorough review led to revised procedures, forms and associated paperwork for internal ethics applications which have ensured robustness and efficiency. The small pool of experienced ethics reviewers has been extended from 6 to 12 members with training provided.

Additionally, in terms of *extending and developing high-quality research activity across the College and in developing research of national and international quality in a number of clearly defined areas*, a number of supportive measures have been implemented successfully since 2014. These include the engagement of two visiting professors (Prof Elizabeth Wood, Sheffield University; Prof Colleen McLaughlin, University of Cambridge) who have provided strategic direction to senior staff, informal feedback on articles and grant applications, and REF support; a doctoral funding policy for staff; a research mentorship scheme to support less experienced researchers; an internal peer review process to ensure higher quality research outputs and funding applications; funding to present at research conferences; an annual funded writing retreat; and a popular series of internal research seminars/webinars and workshops for staff. The percentage of academic staff holding completed doctorates has risen from 54% in 2014 to 67% in 2020, and this has helped to more than double the pool of research active staff in the REF submission from 5 in 2014 to 12 in 2021. There are broad cross-cutting research themes in the College across the following areas: Pedagogy/Curriculum, Special Educational Needs and Inclusion, Early Years Education, Primary and Post-Primary Teacher Education, and Pupil Well-being.

Over the next five years, the College remains committed to extending our reputation as a national and international centre for high-quality, practitioner-focused educational research and scholarship through 5 key objectives of its current Research and Scholarship Strategy: [1] *To engage in research and scholarship of the highest quality* [2] *To develop a rich, vibrant and supportive research and scholarship infrastructure characterised by the highest standards of integrity* [3] *To attract excellent staff and to develop and empower their careers* [4] *To ensure that*

our research has an impact on our teaching but also beyond academia yielding broader economic, social and cultural benefits. [5] To extend our national and international reach by engaging in collaborative partnerships and disseminating our research and scholarship.

Impact has been enabled and facilitated through the appointment of the Research Impact Coordinator (Walsh 2015), the implementation of a Research Impact Policy, and regular staff training workshops providing practical guidance to staff. The College benefits from very strong links with schools across Northern Ireland and also with government, policy makers, the community/voluntary sector, and (increasingly) the media. The two impact case studies presented for REF2021 both reflect our reputation for 'close-to-practice' research: Walsh has built on her 2014 case study and developed her publication record and impact in the field of early years Playful Teaching and Learning, transforming early years pedagogy for 4-6 year olds in NI, resulting in training for over 1400 teachers in 40 hubs, facilitated by the Education Authority. In the second case study, McMurray led one of Northern Ireland's largest ever CPD projects (£4.1million, funded by the Department of Education) which has changed how children with literacy difficulties and dyslexia are taught at whole school level in primary schools across Northern Ireland and beyond. Finally, the College's new *Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement* (CREU) responds to the identified regional research need to address educational underachievement. The launch of the Centre's evidence summary attracted significant media interest in January 2020, and during the ongoing covid-19 pandemic a wide range of stakeholders, policy makers, and legislators have engaged with the Centre's webinar series, blogs and research reports, highlighting its relevance and rootedness in the Northern Ireland context.

Since 1 April 2016 Stranmillis has made every reasonable effort, commensurate with the size of the institution, to ensure compliance with REF Open Access requirements, including communicating guidance to staff from the outset. Full compliance proved challenging due to the significant technical limitations of the College's very basic website (hosted on QUB's content management system), lack of access to the QUB research repository, ongoing financial constraints and the consequent unviability of securing access to commercial research repositories (e.g. JISC, CREST, PURE) for a small number of annual research outputs. Since the launch of its new website in December 2019, however, Stranmillis has been able to comply fully with REF open access requirements, and the implementation of the College's new Open Access Policy in 2019/20 was accompanied by focused training for all academic staff supported by the Marketing Office and Research Office.

The College became a signatory of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers in December 2019 and is committed to implementing its action plan to meet the key objectives of the Concordat.

While the majority of the College's research activity is educational in focus, the research strategy expresses a commitment to "supporting emerging multi-disciplinary areas that reflect the recognised needs of our society". This is exemplified through current staffing which includes teachers/teacher educators, educational psychologists, social workers, philosophers, sports scientists, and subject specialists across the breadth of the Northern Ireland curriculum; and also several recent examples of interdisciplinary collaboration: the work of Purdy (education and psychology collaboration in EU funded project on cyberbullying) Jones (convenor of AHRC-funded Conference on Visual Arts/French with Braganca, UCD), and Walsh (collaboration with psychologists in the field of early years pedagogy).

The Research Office actively encourages collaboration through hosting an annual International Staff Week for our partners (with its focus on scholarship and research collaboration), through coordinating outgoing EU staff mobilities (where research links are encouraged). In recent years two MoUs have been signed with the Controlled Schools Support Council (CSSC), the sectoral body representing one of the largest school sectors in Northern Ireland, and Kyambogo University (Uganda), both of which include a commitment to collaborate on research.

3. People

Stranmillis University College is committed to recruiting and maintaining high calibre staff, and supporting their career progression as researchers. As of December 2020 there are 45 academic staff in the College, of whom the overwhelming majority (93%) are on teaching and research contracts. During the assessment period, the vast majority of academic staff have had permanent contracts (95%), not including research assistants/support staff. The traditional teaching-intensive workload for academic staff allocates 10% FTE time for scholarship and research. Since this can include staff engaged in doctoral studies or focusing solely on scholarship activities (e.g. creation of classroom resources) as well as research-active staff, it was decided to determine SRR through an application process in September 2019 by which staff could apply for an additional 10% research time upon submission of a two-year research plan. It is hoped, funding permitting, to extend this model beyond 2021. While this group forms the basis of the College's REF submission, in order to promote the development of research intensity across the College, *all* forms of research office/HR support are available to *all* staff.

In the current REF period, the College has invested a total of £64.5k in fully funding 11 members of academic staff to complete their part-time doctorates. This is a significant investment on the part of the College, representing around 24% of its staff development budget. The Staff Development Policy explicitly supports research activities (including presenting papers at research conferences) and training for staff in research methods. Staff members funded for EdD/PhD study must attend an annual review meeting to monitor progress as a requirement for continued financial support, led by the Director of Research and Scholarship.

Although the number of researchers employed by the College is small by comparison with larger HEIs, the College has expressed its firm commitment to improving conditions and opportunities for researchers through becoming a signatory of the *Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers* in December 2019. It has already developed an action plan, established a working group and is committed to its implementation e.g. 10 days' staff training for researchers each year, training for managers/PIs, and seeking longer-term research funding to allow more full-time and permanent research contracts.

The College Staff Health and Wellbeing Strategy is primarily implemented and monitored by the Staff Health and Wellbeing Group chaired by the Human Resources Manager. The group is made up of staff representatives (academic and non-academic staff) including senior management representatives, and through wide consultation with staff has developed the internal 'Thrive' programme. 'Thrive' offers staff opportunities to improve their physical and mental health, get outdoors and build collegial relationships through free lifelong learning, subsidised gym access, free health checks, healthy eating initiatives, cycle to work scheme, flexible working and childcare assistance amongst other examples.

Stranmillis staff benefit from staffing policies designed to foster strong research careers, and consequently experience an increasingly lively, stimulating and supported environment. A revised Academic Promotion Policy, recognising the importance of two routes to promotion (Teaching and Scholarship & Teaching and Research), is currently under consultation with the UCU (recognised Trade Union). In order to target a more diverse population and improve links with external organisations, some recent academic vacancies have been offered either as permanent appointments or as secondments (e.g. Senior Lecturer in International Development).

In accordance with the current Memorandum of Agreement with QUB, the College is currently unable to offer a research-based Master's or doctoral programme. However, as detailed above and REF5b, the number of academic staff qualified to doctoral level is now 67%, with several senior lecturing staff regularly acting as doctoral supervisors and viva examiners across the UK and Ireland. Since 2017, as a reflection of the College's research development and in response to student demand, the College's Research Strategy has included the objective of developing its own professional taught doctorate. A working group was formed in October 2019 and negotiations began with Queen's University in 2019-20 to progress this important matter.

Many of our academic staff are considered as Early Career Researchers either upon appointment (if they have already completed a doctorate) or upon graduation following part-time doctoral studies. In both cases, staff are supported in several ways including research mentorship through which they can avail of the experience of more experienced colleagues to support them with, for instance, their first writing projects, grant applications, or conference presentation.

Equality and diversity are key issues, not least given the history of community division in Northern Ireland. Stranmillis works hard to create a supportive and inclusive working environment where all staff are able to thrive and progress. Equality and diversity considerations are constantly taken into account in regard to funding, recruitment and conference attendance opportunities, which are made available to all regardless of characteristics, as set out in the Equal Opportunities Policy. Stranmillis has strong set of policies relating to equality including a Disability Charter which sets out how staff and students should be supported to improve the experience of all with disabilities. The College provides ongoing support for those with a disability through a range of adjustments as required, such as voice recognition software, specialist office furniture and equipment, and adjustments to duties. In REF2021 13.6% of REF-eligible staff have declared a disability, whereas in 2014 approximately 6% of REF-eligible staff had done so. In terms of gender equality, the majority of academic staff (73.3%) are female through to the most senior positions. This reflects the gender balance of the teaching profession more widely, from which the majority of applications traditionally come. During the assessment period, the College has prioritised equity and excellence in research by instituting flexible and remote working for all academic staff. Other forms of support available include funding to attend research conferences, and flexible working arrangements for staff with disabilities and caring responsibilities.

Issues of equality and diversity were central to the creation of the College's Code of Practice. This is evidenced through the training provided to all members of the REF Steering Group and in the commitment to completing Equality Impact Assessments for the proposed processes. Staff with SRR were invited to declare Individual Staff Circumstances in accordance with the REF2019/01 *Guidance on Submissions*, resulting in a successful unit reduction request awarded in September 2020.

4. Income, infrastructure and facilities

During the assessment period, the College has invested heavily in developing resources and facilities to support research and enhance its impact. This investment is detailed in REF5b and summarized here.

Administrative support for research activities has been increased through the expansion and reorganisation of the Research Office, leading to an increased quantity and quality of external funding applications. In 2015, the College appointed a Director of Research and Scholarship (at Senior Leadership level), followed by three additional appointments in the research office: a Finance and Development Officer (2015) a Research Impact Coordinator (2015) and a Research Fellow (2019) for the College's first research centre, the Centre for Research in Educational Underachievement. A stand-alone Research Strategy, devised and implemented in 2015 and revised in 2017 and 2019, aims to promote and support research and scholarship activity across the College. This investment aims to enable the diversification of the College's research income streams, in response to successive reductions in core government funding since 2010, by making applications to competitive grant-awarding external bodies. It is also intended to maximise the research impact of successful research grants, by supporting researchers in the production of high-quality outputs. The Research Team monitors the quality of research outputs and impacts, offers professional development and training, and administers and monitors ongoing projects across the College. This facilitates a high standard of project administration, reporting and invoicing that ensures that risks to project delivery are identified early and deadlines are met. The team also plays a supporting role in research dissemination through the website and social media as well as launch events for reports and books.

Institutionally, as one of the two largest providers of Initial Teacher Education in Northern Ireland, the College has strong links with many nursery, primary and post-primary schools, mainstream and special, across Northern Ireland. A key College strategy for diversifying income has been to provide high-quality CPD for education professionals (including the £4.3million SEN literacy project funded by the Department of Education), drawing on recent research by College staff to deliver evidence-based training. Outstanding funds from these programmes have been successfully recycled into internally funded research projects. The College estate is also used for regular visits of well over 1000 pupils annually from partner schools (though this is currently suspended due to covid-19 restrictions). As an institution specialising in Education, the College's school links represent a major benefit-in-kind which facilitates a range of research activities and impact. Stranmillis also benefits from its status as a University College of QUB through access to research and other professional development courses at the university.

The College has invested over £800,000 in upgrading ICT infrastructure since 2013, including REF2021-compliant open-access functionality within the new College website (December 2019) which makes Stranmillis research more accessible externally, and also improves internal reporting and monitoring of research outputs and impacts. Over the same period, the library has increased its electronic resources, providing access to many more educational research databases than before, increasing online journal access from 200 individual journals to several thousand, and investing in 5000 eBooks.

In terms of equality and diversity, the Research Office offers support equally and without prejudice to all academic and research staff, irrespective of background or contractual status. All staff, whether they have Significant Responsibility for Research or not, are welcome to participate in the mentorship programme, attend face-to-face or online research seminars and workshops, and to

Institutional level environment template (REF5a)

receive support when making funding applications. As detailed in the covid-19 annex, the Research Office is now fully functional online, with staff able to request online support and arrange virtual meetings.

Through this supportive, flexible approach to developing the vitality and sustainability of research activity, it is hoped that more staff would develop their confidence and competence as researchers, as the College looks forward to the next REF period.