UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

THE POSTGRADUATE TIMES

November 2013

WE ARE UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR

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THE FIRST WORD

This isn't the piece I set out to write. On a walk during my holiday in Scotland this summer, I sketched out in my head the bones of a commentary about the nature of identity, place and belonging, hoping to emulate the tone of one of my favourite radio programmes '*This American Life*'.

For those unfamiliar with the programme it is an eclectic mix of stories that consistently document humanity in the round. As I said, though, I'm not writing that piece. Unusually this is not because the composition in my head didn't make it until the end of the walk, but because since I returned from leave our University has not only been shortlisted as University of the Year by *Times Higher Education* (the winner is announced towards the end of November), but we have also won *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* 'University of the Year Award' for 2013–2014.

These commendations are only the most visible part of an impressive set of changes in our external reputation and rankings. Our trajectory in both university and subject-specific league tables has been consistently good. We are moving up the rankings in the *'Complete University Guide'*, *The Guardian* and the (newly merged) *Times/ Sunday Times* league tables and international league tables tell a similar story (QS now puts us as the 62nd best university in the world). In the Russell Group – those universities defined both by research excellence and breadth – Birmingham is now consistently in the top ten.

Such changes to our league table positions are just the most visible expression of the transformations underway. There have been numerous other ways in which our staff have been recognised for their contributions. I don't have space to detail even a fraction of these but we should note that accolades have been given to academic, professional, and support staff, and to undergraduate and postgraduate students from across the University.

You could be forgiven for thinking that this enhanced visibility is just a bauble, unrelated to our core activities of doing great research and providing a great education. After all, many of the fundamentals are going in the right direction. After an exceptional year in 2011–12 for the NSS, research grants and graduate employment (again, I could go on) we consolidated and improved in 2012–13. We are highly innovative – schemes such as the Birmingham Fellows and our unconditional offer strategy for exceptional students are now being copied by many other universities. Last year, external investments were announced in the University Training School, the Institute for Translational Medicine and the High Temperature Research Centre of £100 million and our academics routinely share their expertise in the media.

Yet even if the recognition we are getting reflects an underlying truth, it remains important in itself. We live in extraordinarily volatile times – the future excellence of the University depends not only our being good, but on our having both self-confidence that this is true and external recognition of the fact. Neither our noble history nor our beautiful campus are sufficient to guarantee that students will want to study here or staff want to work here.

Although there is still some way to go, we should all celebrate the progress we've made. I know that these achievements have only been possible as a result of the dedication and efforts of the University community. I also know, to return to my opening statement, that many people strongly identify with this great institution. I certainly do: two of my siblings studied here and after I arrived I discovered that my great, great, great grandfather had been present at the opening of Mason Science College, which later became the University of Birmingham. Since then I've felt it almost to be a matter of family honour to do my part. I feel genuinely privileged to be the University's new Provost and Vice-Principal and look forward to working with our staff, our students and our alumni over the coming years.

Provost and Vice-Principal,
Professor Adam Tickell

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From the petri dish to potential lifesaver

Professor Liam Grover, biomaterials scientist in the School of Chemical Engineering is leading on research at the unique interface between synthetic materials and living tissue.

'I am interested in looking at how materials interact with biological systems and how this causes the biological system to change as well as the properties of the material', says Liam.

The use of soft solid materials in physiological conditions offers potential for groundbreaking medical application. For example, Liam's research has led to the development of novel technologies for the regeneration of tissues, including ceramic bone grafts and a new gel which can deliver populations of cells into human tissues to stimulate repair. This enables localisation of the cell population, something that is critical in maximising therapeutic potential.

Liam works collaboratively with clinical partners and researchers in the College of Medical and Dental Sciences as well as other materials scientists to ensure that this important research has real impact on human lives. He encourages his students to also consider the unique perspective for medical applications, and potential translational impact of their studies, a somewhat alternative route for chemical engineers.

'My "crazy" idea,' Liam says, *'is to grow ligament implants in the lab for injury transplantation'.*

Specifically he is looking at the cruciate ligament; damage to which is one of the most common sports injuries with often devastating results as the ligament cannot repair itself. Recovery currently involves an agonising operating process and long rehabilitation phase to recover. Not such a 'crazy' idea as potentially a miraculous one; this research has won the attention and support of the Royal Orthopaedic Hospital and has been awarded grants from the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council, totalling £500,000, and Orthopaedic Research UK, totalling £160,000.

The big idea, developed with post-doctoral researcher Jennifer Paxton, is to fuse ceramics with blood-derived materials containing human cells to literally grow a ligament in the lab for transplantation. *'Taking a simple blood transfusion from a patient, we can treat it in the lab to form a jelly material which, when added to ceramics and ligament cells, contracts and gradually morphs into the shape of the ligament.*

'The unique combination of materials, which the cells are able to modify, enables the newly formed structure to grow and replicate the natural ligament form.'

While only at an early test phase, this breakthrough has proved important for analysis of ligament properties and has been used to inform rehabilitation. At this stage, the new tissue is currently too weak for clinical testing but Liam is hopeful that in five to ten years' time, we may begin to see life-changing transplants. *'This may be out-there and is certainly high risk but I believe the crazier the idea the bigger the impact. Being able to grow healthy replacement ligaments and bones in the lab really could save lives.'*

Birmingham is an exciting place to be for researchers in this field and Liam highlights that the potential for translational medical technologies in the region is extremely impressive. *'Facilities in the city such as the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital, Centre for Defence Medicine, the Orthopaedic Hospital and plans for Birmingham's medical quarter, as well as significant investment in trauma medicine, mean that there is enormous opportunity for this type of translational research and development of new medical treatments.'*

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Black History Month

This October saw the third consecutive **Black History Month** at the University of Birmingham. The annual event commemorates the national celebration of the ways in which Black people have shaped Britain's history. In co-operation with The Drum, Staff Diversity Team, Birmingham Ethnic Minorities Association and Guild of Students; a diverse programme of events, scholarships and exhibitions featured in the showcase of Black culture that was BHM 2013.

What is Black History Month?

The origin of BHM goes back to the 1920s and the establishment of Negro History Week in the United States. This evolved into Black History Month and was marked every February, chosen because of the birthdays of African-American social reformers Frederick Douglas, and Abraham Lincoln, the President who 'freed the slaves'.

In the UK, BHM launched in the 1980s and was largely the result of community activism, challenging racism in general in British society and the 'Eurocentric' version of history that dominated the state school system. Today BHM has become an important time in the cultural calendar of many of the UK's museums, galleries and local authorities.

Who are 'Black People'?

Over the years, the focus of BHM has expanded to include the history of African, Asian and Caribbean peoples and their contributions to Britain's history as a nation.

In the University's opening Black History Month event on 1 October, six panellists representing the arenas of culture, art and academia grappled with the question of 'What's the Future of Black History Month?' Attendees were also invited to ask their own questions, including 'Has the term always been shared? Is it a political term? Is it racial? How is it changing in an increasingly globalised culture?'

Why is celebrating BHM so important to the University?

'Catherine Hall, in [her book] Civilising Subjects, *uses Birmingham as a case study to demonstrate the interconnected histories of England and the Caribbean. To not celebrate Black History Month would be to ignore an important part of the city's history'* says Ian Grosvenor, Deputy Pro-Vice Chancellor for Cultural Engagement. It is a time for us as a campus to reflect on the ways in which the history, art, culture and science of the African Diaspora have shaped the fabric of British society. Moreover, BHM presents a focused opportunity in which to engage Birmingham's diverse communities with the University's resources.

What did BHM include?

The past and present of the University played a role in at least two of October's events. To complement the Cadbury Research Library's Roots of the University Exhibition, playwright David Edgar gave a talk about 'Arthur and George'. The story, in part, chronicled the plight of George Edalji; one of the University's first mixed race students. Dr Julius Garvey, the renowned surgeon and son of civil right's legend, Marcus Garvey, highlighted the University's community outreach efforts when hosting the Jamaican National Olympics Team in 2012.

Dr Stewart Brown, Reader in Caribbean Literature, had his 'Babel' display on show in the Aston Webb Rotunda throughout September and October: an ongoing series of collages, paintings, digital prints, cards, boxes, books and installations, derived from Stewart's experiments with 'visual language' and inspirations encountered during his time as an academic at the University, and his travels through Africa and the Caribbean.

As a special edition this year was also the 'Scholarship of Blackness'; a blog that featured daily articles from University faculty members whose research focuses on issues of the African Diaspora. The collection in its complete form can now be read at **www.scholarshipofblackness.tumblr.com.**

Intellectual discussion, historical engagement, cultural entertainment; the Black History Month programme had something to offer to all students, staff and the local community.

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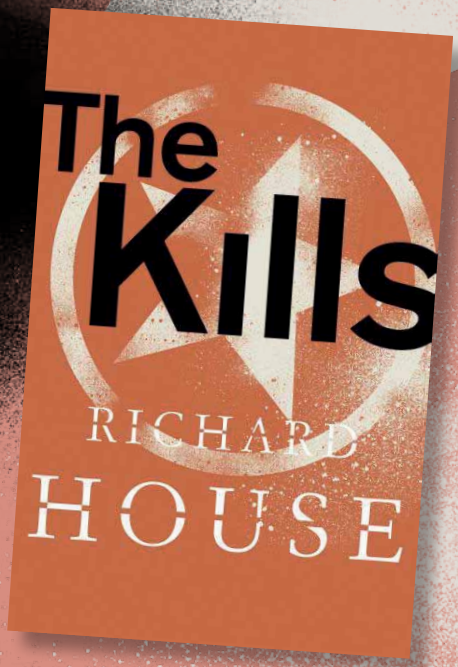
Dr Richard House, of the Department of English, has received a great deal of media attention over the last few months for his position on the Man Booker Prize longlist.



A fascination with human nature interweaves and drives the four books of *The Kills*. Richard interrogates human instinct through entangled and doomed dramatis personae of dodgy government and company agents to Italian pimps and prostitutes, seeking to determine what drives people to commit crime or to become victimised. When asked about his inspiration for the 1,000-page novel, Richard highlighted the human vulnerability in believing what we hear: *'If we distinctly believe what we are told, what happens if we are not told the truth, or if the stories we tell are not the truth? I like the idea that we tend to trust somebody telling stories about themselves and I wanted to consider what would happen if, as a reader, you were reading little histories that you knew were stolen from somewhere else.'*

Balancing on the verge of fiction and reality, the plot for *The Kills* is planted in a bloody room in Naples, from where the novel wildly grows to explore the ways in which crime emits unavoidable shock waves, rippling out to affect others on the peripheral.

In fact, death is rampant throughout to enable Richard to analyse the impact and reach of these waves.

Writing the characters was the most exciting part for Richard. *'Having felt an outsider myself, I was fascinated to explore those feelings in other people and the way some people can feel locked out of society through sexuality, gender, race, culture or something so simple as not speaking a language.'* The most brilliant thing about the novel, he suggests, is that it can make you sympathetic and empathetic in a unique way. *'I hope that people will come at the book in different ways and to enter a debate in different ways.'*

Inspired to take on *The Kills*? Be sure to consider the ebook – first published uniquely in its digital form, this novel pioneers a new art, bravely paving a digitally enhanced pathway for the e-reader, with additional audio and video content. Richard has even quirkily dismantled the third book so that the material can be reordered and read chronologically or by character. He believes the additional dimension enhances the overall mood and sensitivity of the words and encourages the reader to experience the novel in a different way.

The fractured sense of the dismantled text indeed reflects the mood of the story. Richard said of the digital adaptation, *'I really enjoyed playing with the stories and experimenting with the possibilities of suggestion. The high risk nature of this experiment makes the success doubly rewarding.'*

We have followed Dr House's lead and digitally enhanced this feature. Find us online at **intranet.bham.ac.uk/buzzhub** for an exclusive video of our interview with the man himself and find out how he feels about the longlisting, his advice for aspiring writers and more about the inspiration for *The Kills*.

Why not share your favourite book or poem? #pgtimes

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3MT®

Philosophical Triumph in Birmingham's **Three-Minute Thesis** Competition

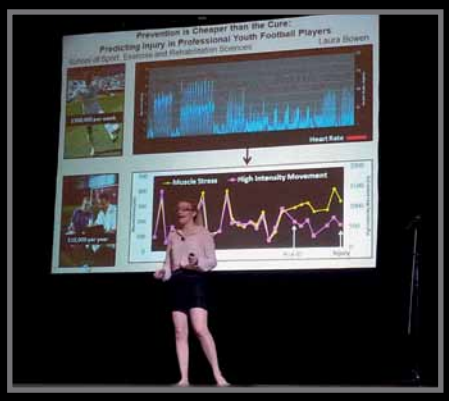
Friday 27 September saw the final of Birmingham's first Three Minute Thesis (3MT®) competition, held in the Great Hall to an audience of over 100 staff, students and guests. The research communication competition – developed by the University of Queensland in 2008 – saw doctoral researchers from across the University battle it out to see who could most impress the panel of academic judges by delivering an engaging presentation on their thesis topic, its originality and its significance, in just three minutes.

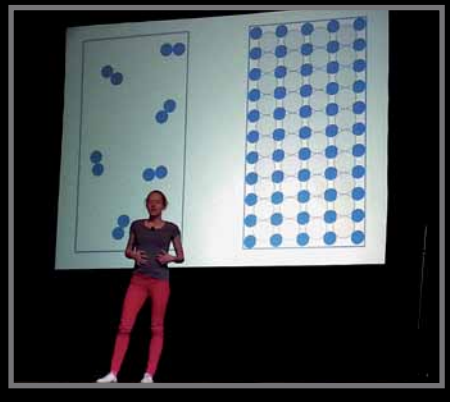
The competition, and a £1,000 research travel bursary, was won by Pete West-Oram from the Department of Philosophy, a PhD candidate researching global healthcare injustice. Runner-up, and recipient of a £500 travel bursary, was Marea Sing from Birmingham Business School, whose research focuses on economic development and macroeconomic policy.

Guest Brian Weetman, Managing Director of Heartland Insurance Group, tweeted to acknowledge that all our finalists were 'inspirational' and gave 'ten winning presentations,' but Pete's gritty delivery and strong visuals stood out as he explained his argument that, in global healthcare, simply 'not to do harm isn't enough'.

The hard-hitting subject matter was presented with style as well as gravitas, and Pete described the competition as a *'fun way to take a break from the fine detail of writing up and to spend some time on the general themes of my thesis.'*

Pete will now go forward to compete against 3MT winners from other universities across the world in the Universitas 21 virtual Three-Minute Thesis final.





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BIRMINGHAM*ON*TV

Health Freaks

Throughout my PhD and career I have always been enthusiastic to encourage public engagement and involvement in science.

While working as a clinical trial coordinator at the University of Birmingham, I responded to a request via a science communication mailing list asking for advice about clinical trials. The request was from TV production company Outline Productions, who were producing a programme to pitch to Channel 4. The concept was to test 'home remedies' for common ailments using clinical trial methodology.

By coincidence, Lucy Vernall from the University of Birmingham's Ideas Lab was on the same email list and saw that I had replied to the thread. Lucy contacted me and offered to help, explaining that Ideas Lab assist University staff in working with external organisations. From there on Lucy and Sam from Ideas Lab were invaluable – they helped me set up a contract with Alta Innovations and the TV company, which meant I got paid as an academic consultant and was covered by appropriate insurance. Lucy and Sam also joined me in meetings with the producers, and helped us form ideas and solve problems regarding how the 'trials' would be conducted.

The show's scientists Dr Rhiannon Pursall, Dr Richard Albardiaz and Professor Martin Bland on the set of *Health Freaks*. Image © *Channel 4*

During the production of the series – approximately three months – I designed paperwork for the 'trials' and other experiments, and advised on protocol development. Channel 4 commissioned the series, called *Health Freaks,* and acquired three high-profile medical presenters: Dr Pixie McKenna, Dr Ayan Panja and Dr Ellie Cannon.

The experience was fantastic – I felt really lucky to have stumbled upon the opportunity and Ideas Lab really made it so much more than I originally anticipated. When I first replied to the request form the TV company, I anticipated that I would just offer some words of advice over the phone. However, with Lucy's help, I ended up being one of three consultants for the show, and even appeared on TV, for which I spent a day filming in London with Dr Pixie and co!

Rhiannon Pursall, Clinical Trial Coordinator, University of Warwick (formerly at Primary Care Clinical Research and Trials Unit, University of Birmingham)

Trust Me… I'm a Doctor

The School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences was featured on the BBC2 programme *'Trust Me I'm a Doctor'.*

The programme aimed to provide the nation with definitive answers to the most popular health questions. Professor Janice Thompson and Scott Robinson, a doctoral researcher in the School, featured in a six-minute long segment focused on the body mass index (BMI) versus fitness debate in the context of health.

Scott's role was to assist Professor Thompson and the BBC with the smooth running of the operation. Specifically, liaising with and helping to organise participants, setting up equipment in the laboratory and gym, and, on the more glamorous side of things, performing physiological assessments on participants. These included VO2 max tests – aimed at assessing a person's aerobic capacity by testing how long they can remain on a treadmill at increasing speed – and body composition evaluations, which pass an electrical current through the participants to determine body fat and lean mass – and all the while appearing on camera and talking through the process to the lead presenter.

The University, and specifically Professor Janice Thompson, ensured that the BBC were able to produce an interesting, contemporary and thought-provoking feature that allowed the nation to gain insight into an important topic; showcasing a department that is at the top of its game.

Scott is a Doctoral Researcher in exercise metabolism in the School of Sport, Exercise and Rehabilitation Sciences at the University of Birmingham. Scott's research focuses on the significance of substrate oxidation (carbohydrate and fat) on exercise performance and the prevalence of metabolic disease. Twitter: @Scottrobinson8

UoB GLOBAL

NORTH AMERICA

The University's ties with the Americas have flourished over recent years. *The Postgraduate Times* takes a look at some of the University's innovative activity in North America.

We are making significant investment to support academic engagement in North America, and have developed a flourishing network of departmental relationships with leading academic institutions, generating research results and funding successes. Exciting educational opportunities have been established for students through new exchange partnerships, and prestigious internships.

In the United States we have a distinctive partnership with the City of Chicago and the State of Illinois. Our close relationship has many strands; however a significant cultural engagement dimension has evolved. Enhancing dialogue across arts and academic sectors offers a major opportunity to build meaningful partnerships, and support global engagement. Initiatives include a jointly organised symposium on 'Local and Global Cultural Engagement' after which Birmingham was invited to contribute to the Chicago Cultural Plan, and developing cross-College research and educational links across the Midwest, in particular with the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign (UIUC), a globally elite public research-intensive university.

Our strong partnership with the Fulbright Commission has led to us being awarded the prestigious Fulbright Distinguished Chair, as well as to us hosting the inaugural Fulbright International Education Administrators (IEA) Seminar programme in the UK.

In Canada we have developed strong partnerships with a number of leading universities, including McGill University and the University of British Columbia as part of the Universitas 21 network. Our academic community leads a number of engagements with leading Canadian universities in a wide range of disciplines. For example, we have strong research links with the University of Toronto in varied areas such as Cancer Studies, Bioethics, and German and European Studies.

The North America Travel Fund has been established to allow academics to seek funding for travel to North America to establish and develop research collaborations, further information is at intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/external/international/relations/fundingopps For further details contact Catherine Lemon, International Development Manager North America, c.lemon@bham.ac.uk

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Green light for new dental hospital and school

As *The Postgraduate Times* went to press, building work on the first integrated stand-alone dental hospital and dental school to be built in the UK for nearly 40 years was due to get underway.

Financial closure was reached last month on the multi-million-pound development, led by Birmingham Community Healthcare NHS Trust, with partners the University of Birmingham, Birmingham and Solihull LIFT (BaS LIFT) and Calthorpe Estates. The development is a key element of the new Edgbaston Medical Quarter and further enhances the city's reputation as a hub of Medicine, Learning and Life Sciences.

The 1.23-hectare (3.05-acre) site at Pebble Mill will see a new four-storey dental hospital and school of dentistry constructed, with a build cost of £34 million. It will house a range of services including walk-in emergency dental care, Restorative, Oral Surgery, Oral Medicine, Dentistry and Paediatric Dentistry.

A second wing will provide world-class research facilities and a modern learning environment for more than 600 undergraduate and postgraduate students and trainees. It is anticipated the building will open to staff, students and the public in time for the 2015 autumn term.

The new building will provide a state-of-the-art clinical environment for patients' treatment as well as world-class teaching facilities. Professor Philip Lumley, Head of the School of Dentistry, said: *'As international leaders in research, teaching and clinical service within dentistry, the University of Birmingham School of Dentistry has welcomed the opportunity to work with our partners and is delighted to have reached this milestone.'*

Both articles originally appeared in *Buzz*, Issue 146 October–November 2013

The Beginning of Time?

Birmingham researchers are in the global spotlight after uncovering what could be the world's oldest 'calendar'.

Main image: Professor Vince Gaffney and Eamonn Baldwin, at Warren Field.

Image below: Artist's impression of a fire burning in one of the pits at the monument.

Archaeology experts from the University of Birmingham have enjoyed global media coverage after publishing brand new research showing they have discovered what could be the world's oldest 'calendar' in a field in Scotland.

The Mesolithic monument, created by hunter-gatherer societies and dating back to around 8,000 BC, was originally excavated in Aberdeenshire, Scotland, by the National Trust for Scotland in 2004. Fresh analysis by a team led by Professor Vince Gaffney, Professor of Lansdcape Archaeology, published in the journal *Internet Archaeology*, has shed remarkable new light on the luni-solar device, showing it pre-dates the first formal time-measuring devices known to Man by nearly 5,000 years.

The capacity to measure time is among the most important of human achievements and the issue of when time was 'created' by humankind is critical in understanding how society has developed.

Until now the first formal calendars appear to have been created in Mesopotamia c. 5,000 years ago. But during this project, which made use of the latest geophysical surveying techniques, the researchers discovered that the monument in Scotland appears to mimic the phases of the Moon in order to track lunar months over the course of a year.

The site, at Warren Field, Crathes, Aberdeenshire, also aligns on the Midwinter Sunrise, providing an annual astronomic correction in order to maintain the link between the passage of time, indicated by the Moon, the asynchronous solar year and the associated seasons.

Vince, who is a Director of the University's Heritage and Cultural Learning Hub, explains: *'The evidence suggests that hunter-gatherer societies in Scotland had both the need and sophistication to track time across the years, to correct for seasonal drift of the lunar year and that this occurred nearly 5,000 years before the first formal calendars known in the Near East. This illustrates one important step towards the formal construction of time and therefore history itself.'*

The Warren Field site was first discovered as unusual crop marks spotted from the air by the Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland. From 2004–6 the National Trust for Scotland excavated the Warren Field pit alignment, which lies on its Crathes Castle Estate, in collaboration with Murray Archaeological Services.

As news of the historic find spread, Vince spent a hectic 24 hours talking to the world's print and broadcast media. *'The interest in this find has been quite remarkable',* he says. *'The story has been covered by media from the UK dailies to National Geographic and from the Dhaka Post to the Huffington Post. The story even trended on Twitter! This demonstrates that communities everywhere have a real interest in how mankind has developed from the earliest times and want to hear about the leading research on the subject carried out at Birmingham.'*

First published in *Buzz*, Issue 145 August–September 2013

WE ARE UNIVERSITY OF THE YEAR

The University of Birmingham has been named *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* University of the Year 2013–14.

Here are just some of the reasons why:

1. Innovative approaches – such as our unconditional offer strategy successfully piloted in 2013
2. We are recruiting outstanding post-doctoral researchers on a trajectory to become the next generation of research and academic leaders through our Birmingham Fellows scheme
3. Our Birmingham Professional programme represents and values the excellence, distinctiveness, and impact of our administrative, support and technical staff
4. The University's School and Sixth Form, due to open in 2015, will help to deliver our vision of creating a learning community to maximise the personal and academic achievement of its pupils
5. In the last year we have won nearly £100 million for new projects including the High Temperature Research Centre
6. From pioneering life-saving drugs in the fight against cancer to discovering the world's oldest calendar, research from our university is creating major impact on the city, the region and the world
7. The University generates over £1 billion of regional economic activity annually
8. Our league table trajectory has been consistently positive – we have moved up the rankings in each of the *Complete University Guide*, *The Guardian, QS World Rankings,* and *The Times/Sunday Times* league tables
9. Our transformed Access to Birmingham (A2B) programme is helping students from families and communities in the West Midlands who have little or no experience of higher education to find out about what studying at university involves
10. Excellence in student satisfaction – Birmingham achieved 90 per cent student satisfaction with teaching in the 2013 National Student Survey

THE TIMES
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University of the Year
2013-14
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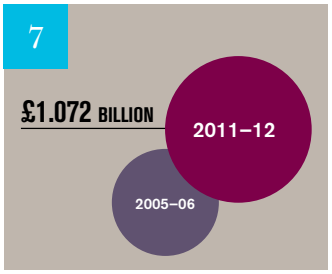

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A2B

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