

What is the Value Proposition for Students as Learners at Contemporary Research-Intensive Universities?

U21 Educational Innovation Cluster Position Statement: April 2017

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This Position Statement clarifies the value proposition for students studying at contemporary research-intensive universities (RIUs). Evidence that education in RIUs meets these criteria would help to address the challenges that RIUs face in identifying their distinctive offer, as well as developing future priorities.

The Position Statement was developed in a three-day conference held at the University of Birmingham, UK (U21 Educational Innovation Conference, October, 2016) with participants from 21 of the 25 U21 members. Synthesized from small-group working discussions at the conference, the outcomes reiterate a commitment to the findings of the Boyer Commission report (USA, 1998).

The core value proposition describes some features that are already in place in many U21 universities and others that are more aspirational. This Position Statement could, therefore, be used as a benchmark against which to map current provision, as a market differentiator, or as a driver for change.

The core proposition is that RIUs offer exceptional opportunities for Learning Gain (defined as 'distance travelled') by offering all students:

1. An opportunity to become part of an intellectually stretching, research-rich, multi-disciplinary learning community comprised of highly talented students and expert academic and support staff;
2. Access to a vibrant, flexible and cutting-edge curriculum;
3. Transformative and authentic learning experiences grounded in the exacting values of a researcher mind-set;
4. Critical engagement in the co-creation of new knowledge and innovation;
5. Teaching informed by engagement with research, research informed by engagement with teaching, and academic teachers who use contemporary evidence-based HE pedagogy;
6. Unrivalled breadth and depth of personal development opportunities within and beyond the campus;
7. A degree qualification that is highly valued by employers;
8. Lifelong access to a global community of students, staff, alumni and employers.

These elements of the core proposition are further expanded upon below. The EI Cluster Steering Group welcomes feedback and commentary. Please contact [Lavinia Winegar Gott](#) with comments.

Practical examples

1. [An opportunity to become part of a stretching, research-rich, multi-disciplinary learning community comprised of highly talented students and expert staff.](#)

Contemporary RIUs are comprehensive in their subject mix so they are able to offer students access to learning in and beyond a single discipline. RIUs seek to recruit students of the highest calibre who have the ability to contribute to the learning community and benefit from the stretching academic experience on offer. Academic staff at RIUs are recognised internationally for thought-leadership and expertise in their specialist fields. The range and strength of intellectual expertise in a RIU attracts external experts who add further value to the learning community. At their best, RIUs offer unique cross- and inter-disciplinary learning opportunities.

2. [Access to a vibrant, flexible and cutting-edge curriculum.](#)

Curriculum content in a contemporary RIU is both grounded in – and contributes to – cutting edge knowledge in its fields of study. Curriculum design ensures the curriculum is responsive to new knowledge and understanding and to changes in societal priorities and students as learners. ‘Learning Gain’ is enhanced by engagement with a cutting-edge curriculum.

3. [Transformative and authentic learning experiences grounded in the exacting values of a researcher mind-set.](#)

RIUs are not merely just a linear continuation or larger versions of the educational institutions that UG students have attended prior to university. The transition to a RIU should be experienced by students as a transformation that requires/develops a researcher mind-set from day one. An effective researcher mind-set is a defining feature of students who graduate from RIUs, and this makes them highly attractive to employers. ‘Learning Gain’ can be characterised as immediate, lifelong and life-wide.

4. [Critical engagement in the co-creation of new knowledge and innovation.](#)

In RIUs, students are engaged in the development of new knowledge in specific subject areas and (for some) across the boundaries of subjects. A defining feature of studying in a community of highly talented learners is the on-going development of fine-tuned critical-analytical skills, the resilience to travel the path to acquire them and, ultimately, confidence in deploying them. Innovation occurs in the intellectual interactions between teachers as researchers and students as researchers. ‘Learning Gain’ is evidenced by creativity and innovation.

5. [Teaching informed by engagement with research, research informed by engagement with teaching, and teachers who use contemporary evidence-based HE pedagogy.](#)

Teaching and research represent the core business of RIUs and both are supported, valued and rewarded. In subjects and disciplines, teaching is delivered by expert teams of academics who are passionate about their subject area and the contribution it can make to society. It is through

teaching that academics inspire the next generation and ensure that knowledge continues to grow. In their interactions with highly talented students, teacher-researchers gain new, contemporary insights that can inform aspects of their research and, in particular, its societal impact. In RIUs, all teaching is based on the best available evidence about effective HE pedagogies. 'Learning Gain' is enhanced by the quality of teaching.

6. Unrivalled breadth and depth of personal development opportunities in and beyond the curriculum.

Most RIUs are large, comprehensive universities with outstanding place-based and digital campuses. These comprise diverse student, staff and local communities, top class facilities, a range of support services to underpin academic and personal development, a vast array of extra-curricular opportunities in and beyond campus, and student organisations (unions/guilds, societies) that offer stretching opportunities for campus and community engagement, leadership and personal development (with obvious benefits for wider Learning Gain).

7. A degree qualification that is highly valued by employers.

Graduates from RIUs are known for their academic and personal skills. Employers value RUI graduates for depth of knowledge, critical-analytical skills, innovative thinking, evidence-based actions and intellectual and personal confidence grounded in deep knowledge and a broad range of experiences. Whether they are employed or self-employed, graduates of RIUs become leaders in their chosen fields and make wider contributions beyond formal employment.

8. Lifelong access to a global community of students, staff, alumni and employers.

Studying at a RIU offers lifelong benefits. The academic learning community of which students become a part is a global community. Alumni of RIUs are leaders in their fields and they are found across the globe and in every field. They share a common research-led learning experience and the transformation this brings and they understand the need for innovation and evidence-based action grounded in researcher values and practices. In their roles as leaders, alumni from RIUs are characterised by a willingness to support and/or offer mentorship to highly talented individuals from all backgrounds, particularly those who face challenges in accessing an RIU education.

Conclusion

Individual RIUs will meet each of these descriptors to varying degrees. If the elements of the value proposition in this position statement are accepted, and the descriptors agreed, it seems likely that actions will be required in some of these areas in order to make the value proposition a reality for all students at each RIU:

- All students should experience the unique benefits of being a learner in a multi-disciplinary university with a global outlook;
- The move from school (or employment) to RIU should be regarded as transformation rather than transition, and this understanding should be embedded into all induction activities and the first term/year of study;
- From day one of a course of study, education provision must be infused with a researcher mind-set and researcher values, and students invited to become part of the research community 'from the inside';
- The RIU curriculum must be at the cutting edge and this requires nimble design and robust quality control at programme level and deepening evidence-based expertise in learning and teaching;
- Students need explicit opportunities to develop and evidence intellectual confidence, fine-tuned critical-analytical skills and the capacity to innovate;
- A new 'team education' approach might be required to guarantee all students a research-intensive education taught through cutting edge HE pedagogies;
- All teachers in RIUs should be required to undertake career-long CPD to maintain professional good standing;
- There should be a renewed focus on the development of the Digital Campus and its optimal interaction with the Place-based Campus to ensure graduates from RIUs can operate effectively in – and influence – the future;
- Alumni of RIUs are leaders who offer mentoring and support to other alumni and perform an extended outreach/access service to those who have been unable to access a RIU education or who need additional support.

Appendix: Key Questions

1. *An opportunity to become part of a stretching, research-rich, multi-disciplinary learning community comprised of highly talented students and expert staff.*

Key questions: Do all students benefit from multi/interdisciplinary learning opportunities? Should RIUs do even more to recruit the most able students from all backgrounds? Are we supporting/encouraging RIU academic staff to become acknowledged subject and pedagogy experts?

2. *Access to a vibrant, flexible and cutting-edge curriculum.*

Key questions: Are we confident that curriculum design and process are nimble enough to respond to change in timely ways? Are we certain that all students have access to a vibrant, cutting edge curriculum?

3. *Transformative and authentic learning experiences grounded in the exacting values of a researcher mind-set.*

Key questions: Upon their arrival at an RIU, are we confident that all students experience learning as a transformation? Do we differentiate sufficiently between the experiences of UG and PGT students? Are students able to 'come alongside' researcher-lecturers so they can understand research from the inside, including productive failure? Our systems require all students make this transition in lockstep, whereas in reality it takes different students different durations: could we do more to support this?

4. *Critical engagement in the co-creation of new knowledge and innovation.*

Key questions: Do we make enough of the development of intellectual confidence as an outcome of education at a RIU? Do we offer sufficient opportunities for innovation?

5. *Teaching informed by engagement with research, research informed by engagement with teaching, and teachers who use contemporary evidence-based HE pedagogy.*

Key questions: How can we ensure that teaching and research remain integrated in RIUs and over the course of an academic career? In RIUs (in particular) can we defend the absence of mandatory career-long professional development in HE pedagogy?

6. *Unrivalled breadth and depth of personal development opportunities in and beyond the curriculum.*

Key questions: Have we paid enough attention to the digital 'campus' in RIUs? Do we ensure that our students graduate with a level of critical digital literacy that will ensure they are confident and intelligent digital citizens/leaders? What 'extra' personal development opportunities are available to our PGT students?

7. *A degree qualification that is highly valued by employers.*

Key questions: Are we equipping our graduates for their futures? Should leadership training become an explicit feature of education in a RIU?

8. *Lifelong access to a global community of students, staff, alumni and employers.*

Key question: Is this an expanded/nuanced role for RIU alumni and is it feasible to develop it further?