University of Bristol

School of Psychological Science Research Strategy

(Finalized by Stephan Lewandowsky, 7/7/19, after extensive consultation with colleagues)

Mission

To deliver original, rigorous, and significant research into human cognition, emotion, and behaviour in order to advance the scientific discipline of psychology, and to provide outstanding, research-led teaching that equips our undergraduate and post-graduate students for a range of futures both within psychology and beyond.

Vision

To be an internationally-recognised centre for research and teaching in psychological science. To advance the discipline through the production of world-leading research, based on a strict adherence to ethical principles and a focus on replicability, and to apply that knowledge in the service of society. To deliver excellent teaching that is evaluated and developed in partnership with our students in order to equip them for their future vocations. To work collectively in a supportive environment that takes seriously issues of equality, diversity, and inclusivity, and which mentors and supports students and staff at all stages of their career development.

Position Assessment

Psychology has been taught as a subject in Bristol since the early 1900s, and Conwy Lloyd Morgan was the first Professor of Psychology (and Ethics) in the UK. In 1951 the then Department of Philosophy and Psychology was split to form a dedicated Department of Psychology, from which the current School traces its roots. At present the School is home to nearly 40 academic staff with a mixture of research and teaching duties, and to approximately 30 academic staff on research only contracts, and approximately 60 post-graduate research students. Our research is organised into three research themes: cognitive science; brain and behaviour, and physical and mental health, which together reflect a tradition of excellence in experimental psychology coupled with real strengths in the application of psychology to real world issues. Our use of state-of-the-art technology and statistical approaches and status as the developers of current psychological theory mean that our research embodies the University’s vision of ‘tradition with edge’

However, continued growth in student numbers (an undergraduate population of nearly 500 students and a set of successful PGT programmes) has meant that an excessively high student-staff-ratio is an area of critical concern and threatens our ability to deliver world-
class research. To alleviate this problem, appointments have already been made in our Physical and Mental Health stream where funding is presently more widely available. We anticipate at least three further appointments to alleviate this pressure during 2019 and beyond; see below for our appointment strategy.

**Strategic Goals**

_“We will produce world-class research that can help people and societies to maximize their potential”_

- A School with enhanced visibility at the national level, with presence on granting panels and other national bodies.

- A larger School with a re-balanced student staff ratio in line with the Russell Group median, that has critical mass in key research areas.

- A School with a thriving, motivated, and diverse community of scholars who feel valued and supported whatever their employment pathway, and have the resources and colleagues needed to conduct leading-edge research.

- A School that is aware of the particular challenges being faced by junior colleagues in today’s funding environment, and that has in place mentoring mechanisms to facilitate career progression of colleagues in all pathways.

- A School that strictly adheres to ethical principles strives to be at the leading edge of the movement to raise research quality through Open Science practices and emphasis on reproducibility, and that recognizes the particular challenges that arise from this for certain research areas.

- A school to nurture research that may ultimately serve to maximize individual and collective human potential.

- A School housed in a new building co-located with other Schools in our Faculty, with facilities for state-of-the-art research in our key areas of strength.

**Strategic Actions**

_“We must let our academics be academics who can focus on scholarship and generation of new knowledge”_

- The single-most important strategic priority is to free up research time for academics. We will pursue multiple avenues to achieve this. For example, we will use any staff ‘buy
out’ to employ additional research support within the School (rather than removing that individual from teaching duties). We look to schedule teaching in ways that allow people time to write grant applications. We will consider developing policies (e.g., relating to email responsiveness and student contact expectations) to explicitly free up time for research. We will seek to alleviate administrative workload by streamlining our procedures.

- We have reorganised the School into three distinct research streams, called Brain and Behaviour; Cognitive Science; and Physical and Mental Health. Each stream has a leader who is poised to encourage colleagues to come together for grant applications and research projects. To illustrate, the ‘memory and language’ group within the cognitive stream has obtained funding to invite potential collaborators to spend time in the School to coordinate projects between colleagues whose research might otherwise be too far apart to warrant collaboration.

- We will bring colleagues together, where possible and appropriate, to apply for large grants and to identify areas for potential centres and so on. This may involve initiatives such as a “grant-writing away day”, strategic planning meetings by stream coordinators, and so on. All such initiatives will involve a cascade of backstops of alternative funding opportunities if an application is unsuccessful.

### Highlighted Research Challenges

The School places its research strategy at the nexus of three competing but partially overlapping landscapes, each with its own challenges and questions:

- **The internal environment.** What are our strengths? How can those be exploited without disempowering excellent scholars in other, less prominent, areas? How can we ensure that people team up so their capabilities are amplified?

- **The university environment.** How does our research fit within the university’s strategy? How do our strengths mesh with that of other sectors of the university? Are there research foci elsewhere in the university that our developing research areas could benefit from?

- **The global environment.** What are the biggest challenges facing our society and the world at large? How can psychology contribute to resolving those challenges?

We have collectively identified the following three specific research challenges that constitute unifying themes of pursuit:

### In Human Time

Time quantifies our life, motivates our productivity and is the metric by which we are judged and rewarded (e.g. “on time” “golden time”, “time off”). Increasingly, time reflects the toxicity of modern life as our human needs conflict with the drive for productivity (e.g. “time pressure”, “time constraint” “out of time” “making time”). As we look forward, the
uncertain consequences of societal and climate change will force us to reconsider our individual and common purpose within unfamiliar time frames. Therefore, the value of our decisions in time, that is finding the right time to eat, to celebrate, to reflect, or to leave become critical to our resilience and adaptability. In human time, the challenge is to look beyond the basic metrics of sufficiency and productivity (e.g. ‘how long’ and ‘how much’) to understand how the interplay of time, need and purpose, can govern and optimise our existence.

Homo Urbanicus

Human beings have an outstanding ability to adapt to their environment, thus making us so successful in evolutionary terms. Moreover, no other species has modified their environment as much for their own needs. Those new human-made environments have changed the way we live and the kind of stressors our embodied brains are exposed to. In particular, the complexity of today’s urban environments are so great that adaptation for one aspect of urban living can easily lead to maladaptation for another. We have inherited a psychological phenotype that is no longer optimised for the environment in which many people live. As a consequence, we are now experiencing negative side effects of urbanization, such as social and health inequality, crime and violence, poor mental health, and stress. Our challenge is to tackle the way ‘homo urbanicus’ can live up to his or her full potential in modern urban environments.

Cognitive Inequality and the Burden of Knowledge

The world is becoming increasingly complex. We become more and more overloaded with information, and this overload presents people of differing cognitive abilities and social backgrounds with diverse challenges. Whereas some people thrive on the availability of sophisticated technologies that allows us to optimize our preference satisfaction, others may have difficulty coping with the multitude of PIN codes they have to remember. Whereas some people can tolerate the nuance and ambiguity that arises from knowing so much about so many different aspects of the world, others may seek refuge in simplification and sound bites. One reason for the current surge of populism around the world may be people’s yearning for a simpler world and for a reduction in how much the public is expected to know. How do we better manage access to knowledge when its abundance has turned knowledge into a burden? How can we preserve a traditional childhood if there is so much to learn that no one can become an astrophysicist unless they start studying at age 7 or 8? How can we offload the burden of knowledge to external devices without handing control over our intellectual discourse to machines? Our challenge is to examine how people with different cognitive abilities can fulfil their potential in an information economy.
Appointment Strategy

The School’s appointment strategy is based on consideration and balancing of a number of factors which include teaching and leadership needs, and equality and diversity factors. The following are key research-related drivers that also play into appointment decisions:

- **Opportunism.** Grab opportunities as they arise, for example via joint appointments with other schools when suitable candidates are available.
- **Funding availability.** Appoint candidates on the basis of external funding that they bring with them and their potential to secure future research funds.
- **Research direction.** Appoint candidates on the basis of their research direction, and how that fits within the School’s strategic plans and relates to existing research strengths.
- **Academic excellence.** Appoint candidates irrespective of the direction of their research and its compatibility with existing strengths, based only on indicators of excellence.

Each of those drivers, alongside the other factors highlighted above, constitutes a legitimate and valuable ingredient of an appointment strategy.

Each of the School’s future appointments will seek an appropriate balance between those drivers through a process of consultation.

Measuring Success

*“We seek to facilitate scientific breakthroughs”*

- The purpose of our strategy is to facilitate greater levels scientific breakthrough, knowledge generation and wisdom. Evidence of success will be measured through the quality of our publications and the journals in which they appear, and through the impact they have on the field and society at large.

- We are committed to maximizing the translation of ideas, knowledge and insight into impact. Many findings from the Physical and Mental Health stream have immediate applications.

- We are committed to training researchers at all levels and across academic pathways and will mentor outstanding individuals to become the research leaders of the future. Our success will be measured by following the career paths and achievements of these talented researchers.

- We recognise the importance of research having real-world impact wherever appropriate, while at the same time championing the importance of basic research. We are therefore committed to exploiting the potential impact of any research conducted by the School, without however making impact a goal by itself.