

Leader column

The Strategy refresh and facing the challenges for higher education

Our year here began in impressive fashion with the second Student Education Conference attracting a record audience, excellent speakers and inspiring sessions.

The conference theme of 'Great Expectations' summed up the main challenges facing higher education this year: whether students paying £9k fees will have had their expectations exceeded or met; and whether the government will further alter the A-level threshold for unlimited student recruitment or perhaps further reduce the cap on the number of students that institutions can accept below that level. Whatever the outcomes, I'm convinced that marrying superb student education with world-class research activity, as we strive to do at Leeds, is the way to drive excellence and meet raised expectations.

By now most of you will have heard the news that I have accepted a new appointment and will be leaving the University later this year. Already the dust is settling and the process for recruiting a new Vice-Chancellor is under way. Meanwhile, the Strategy continues to have great support around the University and the feeling is that it would be a mistake not to keep going with the Strategy refresh. We're still going to be pushing towards academic excellence, and the Strategy will continue to have teaching and its relationship to research at its enduring core. We're still going to be international and we're still going to be heavily involved in high-quality, interdisciplinary work that has impact – none of that is going to change. The area we do really need to consider is the long-term implications of the current market for student recruitment.

As we go through the second recruitment cycle, many people are beginning to think that there has been a significant market change and that fewer people are deciding to come to university, even those with quite good grades. It's vital that the implications of this are really thought through before we produce the new Strategy map. This thinking will be a very valuable piece of work for my successor, and the University will then be able to benefit from



a fresh set of eyes, a new injection of energy and some different ideas.

As far as finding my replacement is concerned, there is a mood for speed but also an awareness that time must be taken to ensure the right decision is made. Preliminary discussions have taken place and a Joint Selection Committee has been put together.

I have had literally hundreds of messages of congratulations from colleagues at every level in the University, students, alumni, other academics – national and overseas – and staff at UCL. What many of them acknowledge is just how much the University of Leeds has achieved over the last eight and a half years. It's a classic truism that when you're close to something, you don't necessarily see it clearly. But people outside the institution, who can look objectively at whether or not we have improved, can see that Leeds is a great place and has done well. There is widespread acknowledgement that our improvement is down to the teamwork that we have achieved across the University and the efforts of all our staff. Are we as perfect as I would have hoped? Of course not! But, we've made such good progress and we've got such momentum that I think we're unstoppable.

We have appointed a new Pro-Chancellor and Chair of the Council – the University's governing body – in succession to Linda Pollard. David Gray is a lawyer, currently Chairman of Eversheds International, and previously Chief Executive Officer and managing partner of Eversheds. A Yorkshireman, he worked at Eversheds in Leeds and although now in London for his national and international-level roles, his home remains local. David will take over early in the next academic year but,

prior to that, he'll be joining the Council as a full member. Linda will be a hard act to follow, having served two terms of office with distinction but David will also bring an experienced and distinguished track record – and challenge, that is both constructive and supportive, will be very helpful in these more volatile and turbulent times.

Further good news is the \$4 million award from an alumnus, Bacteriology and Biochemistry graduate Peter Cheney, and his wife Susan. It will establish an endowed fellowship programme, allowing outstanding scholars from around the globe to develop their research and other academic activities at the University. This scheme will have a major impact, not just on the fellows who benefit from this tremendous opportunity for personal development, but also on our staff and students. We are so grateful to Peter and Susan – and indeed all our supporters – for their generosity. There has been terrific progress in building relationships with our alumni; we're now up to 198,000 alumni and have a great team in Alumni and Development.

I'm also extremely proud of our health and safety performance – it's a good example of working closely with the campus unions to achieve something really worthwhile. As a result, our culture has completely changed and people take health and safety seriously, because they know how important it is. After the initial campaign, the number of serious incidents shot down and stayed down. The annual VC's Health and Safety Awards – which you can read more about on page 8 – are a way of rekindling everyone's thinking about the importance of health and safety. Congratulations to all the winners – they've done a fantastic job of making the University a safer place.