

Leader column

Reviewing our strategy, highlighting our strengths

Some of you have noticed that I've started to write a regular feature on For Staff with my reflections on the week's events. So much happens in the sector and on campus that it's easy to write a couple of paragraphs each week, whether it's on our research achievements, staff and student news, or the activities and events across the University that make my job so enjoyable.

Two topics that have recently generated important discussion across the University are the review of our Strategy and the outcome of our first cycle of undergraduate recruitment under the new fees regime. 'Our strategy, your say' is the first phase of open consultation on our strategy and I'm delighted that so many colleagues have already responded, both in writing and in person. The first series of open meetings was well attended – with over 300 staff across all three sessions. Our main objective was to involve and listen to people right from the beginning of the process. Members of the senior team and I enjoyed the interesting, wide-ranging and sometimes challenging discussions.

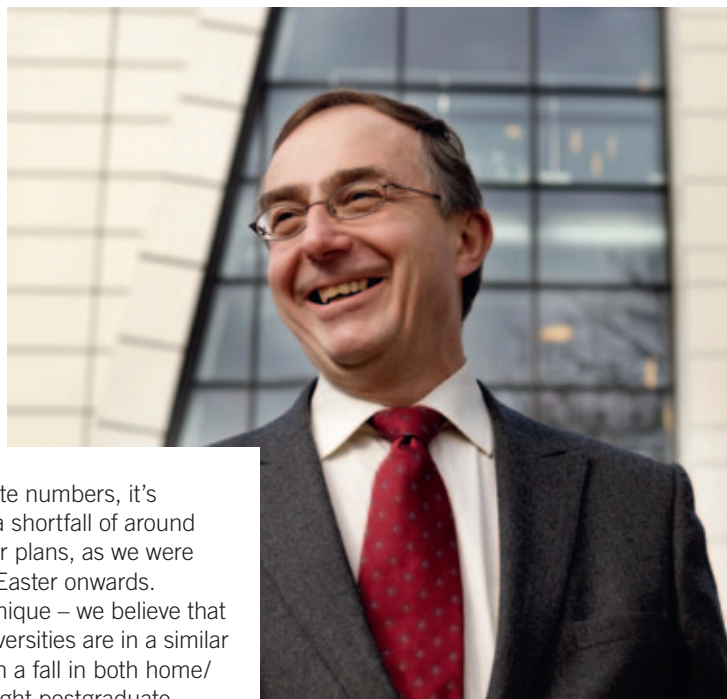
It's not too late to participate and I'd be keen to hear more from staff who found it difficult to attend, particularly academic staff busy at the start of the academic year. For those of you who have recently joined the organisation, now is the time to shape the future of this University – do have your say.

Initial feedback suggests that we should continue to strive towards our strategic ambition, but we have some important questions to answer about how we implement and deliver the strategy more effectively. Our next steps are to consider all the feedback and have our proposal for a revised strategy ready to share with you and our Council early in the new year.

In terms of undergraduate numbers, it's now clear that we have a shortfall of around 500 students against our plans, as we were anticipating from about Easter onwards. However, Leeds is not unique – we believe that many Russell Group universities are in a similar position. We've also seen a fall in both home/EU and international taught postgraduate student numbers, the former also reflecting a national trend. The reason for the downturn in international PGT is under further analysis – UKBA and changes to post-study work haven't helped, but there are a number of other factors that are making competition for high-quality international students much more challenging. The good news is that both international undergraduate and postgraduate research recruitment remain buoyant.

Fortunately, our finances are in good shape, in no small part due to our previous hard work in keeping our cost base under control, and we are therefore able to cope with a short-term fluctuation in fee income as a result of the volatility and highly competitive nature of the more marketised recruitment cycle. The shortfall in student numbers does have a financial impact against our plan, but there was flexibility built in, and some mitigating adjustments can be made, mostly involving the delay of some of our proposed local investments.

We recognise that the recruitment market is changing and we will have to work hard to ensure that applicants make Leeds their firm choice, both undergraduate and postgraduate, home/EU and International. A great deal of work is underway involving the Deans, Pro-Deans for Student Education and Heads of Schools, to make sure we're all focused on recruitment and that local admissions teams feel supported. We're thinking through each part of the recruitment process so it's managed to the highest possible level of professionalism – from the way we build our external reputation to our communications with prospective students, to the timeliness of making offers and how we interact with applicants after an offer is made, both at home and overseas.



But other institutions will also be aiming to improve and there's no room for complacency. We need to be clear about our academic excellence and highlight the strengths that league tables, surveys and datasets don't routinely measure. That means talking about the quality of our interactions with students in personal tutoring and LeedsforLife; our outstanding Quality Assurance Agency reports; the fact that we have the highest number of National Teaching Fellows in the UK; the world-leading research carried out and our fantastic campus and facilities. We should seek to promote our success in all these areas.

The latest results from the National Student Survey show that we've gone up in every question for the second year in a row. That says to me that our improvements are real, consistent and likely to continue. We're above our benchmark, which is fantastic, and to have a 78% return from one of the largest cohorts of students in the country is excellent. I'm delighted about the score for Leeds University Union, which rated us in the country's top three student unions – it's thoroughly deserved.

We're currently deep into the Academic School and Performance Review meetings, the objective of which is to ensure that there's enough focus and attention on driving academic excellence and School academic performance to the maximum; because ultimately that translates into success across all areas.

I am grateful to the School senior management teams, who have done a great job in preparing for these meetings, and for demonstrating enormous commitment to improving the academic performance of their Schools.