

Leader column

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Building partnerships and supporting the REF

It's not every day that Britain's former top spy and an iconic business visits campus. But then, the grand opening of Marks & Spencer's Company Archive was always going to be special and this event didn't disappoint.

Dame Stella Rimmington, the ex-Director General of MI5, and M&S chairman Robert Swannell were joined by more than 200 guests from the University, the company, the city and region at a dinner in the Refectory to celebrate the opening of the Michael Marks Building. This fantastic building is symbolic of our close partnership with M&S and its unveiling was a great opportunity to celebrate achievements so far and to re-emphasise what we want the partnership to achieve in the future.

Since it was formed in 2009 the partnership has become deeply embedded in both organisations. Today, there are innovative activities in research and student education across multiple faculties, schools and University services. The archive is now open for research, student education and outreach work. I urge all to get involved to help ensure the collaboration achieves its full potential.

Our strategy map identifies developing and maintaining high-quality, international strategic partnerships as a way to enhance our profile as an international university. Our partnership with Opera North – *Dare* – was launched in 2007 and at that time few would have imagined it would achieve so much. Today, there are more than 100 projects involving all nine faculties encompassing research, performance – bringing together artists and students, lectures and seminars, activities to inspire young people as well as funded scholarships and fellowships.

Our partnership with Arup, one of the world's most famous civil engineering companies, grows stronger too. We recently signed a Memorandum of Understanding that will

result in academic colleagues working alongside designers, engineers and technical experts at Arup to address major challenges to society. As with M&S, the relationship is handled at a high level within the University and fed by academic involvement. As a business, Arup is academically-minded and like the University, is a believer in interdisciplinary working. Arup identifies six of our nine transformation fund projects – which support academics to collaborate on cutting-edge interdisciplinary research – as relevant to its business. These projects were one of the first initiatives taken from our strategy map. It's fantastic that this initiative is now attracting further investment and building engagement with industry. Arup's enthusiasm is a ringing endorsement of our approach and credit should go to Denise Bower, Chris Clegg, Bill Gale, David Hogg, Martin Tillotson, Richard Keegan and others.

It's encouraging too that a wide range of subjects are coming up during my school and service visits, perhaps indicating that national issues – such as tuition fees and university reform – are now a little less prominent amongst our concerns. There was a real buzz in the Institute of Communications Studies, which has recruited new staff and recently had a fantastic careers day involving alumni from journalism and communications. I was impressed by the School of History's internship scheme, with students given work experience in the School to enhance their employability. In the School of Modern Languages and Cultures a sustainable plan is in place following the review process. New programmes are running, research groupings are developing across previous departmental boundaries and there is major research success. Matthew Treherne and Claire Honess recently secured around £975,000 from the AHRC to investigate Dante and Medieval Florence – a fantastic result.

I recently walked past the Edward Boyle Library after visiting the School of Maths and found ISS staff tending flowerbeds. I stopped to chat but forgot to introduce myself. I suspect some colleagues initially wondered who I was! The fact that colleagues are voluntarily choosing to contribute to the 'greening' of campus captured something of the optimism that I sense around the University.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is regularly cropping up and it's worth restating our approach. As 2* research will no longer be funded by HEFCE, we must be realistic about what we submit. In the RAE 2008, we opted for a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5, achieved 2.72 and were ranked 14th in GPA league tables. We are now aiming for a GPA of 3.0 to gain a place in the top ten.

This means staff with 2* and possibly some 3* publications won't be submitted in REF2014. I know there are concerns about this, but let me reassure colleagues of the priorities which govern our thinking. First and foremost, the GPA we achieve and our national reputation is critically important to our future; second, we should include as many staff as possible in the REF; third, comes the financial impact of our REF submission. I hope it's clear that funding is the last of our three priorities.

The University is a very large team, whereas REF2014 is just a single snapshot taken at a certain point in time. You remain a member of the team whether or not your work is submitted and if not, to continue the analogy, we will support you to be 'in frame' next time. We have always said that in and of itself, inclusion in REF2014 will not influence your subsequent career progression in this university.

I am also aware there are concerns about difficulties in accurately judging whether work is 2* or 3*. Our response is to undertake the evaluation process as professionally as possible, involving external opinion where relevant. Everything will be considered in fine detail to ensure we have put in the very best submission we can muster as a university. The impact case studies are critical, and that's why we are making available more than £490,000 over the next three years for reviewing, evidence-gathering and verification.

Finally, I'm delighted Durham, Exeter, Queen Mary and York are joining the Russell Group. Each excels in research, innovation and education and has a critical mass of research excellence across a wide range of disciplines. It's particularly pleasing that York is joining. It's fantastic that Yorkshire now has three Russell Group institutions, confirming that the White Rose universities are indeed a substantial force in UK higher education.