

Leader column

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Access, applications and academic excellence

Widening participation and fair access are phrases that until recently probably didn't mean much to people outside higher education. But in the last few weeks the thorny question of how to get more young people from less-affluent backgrounds into our best universities flared up spectacularly with plans to appoint a new director of the Office of Fair Access (OFFA).

Let's step back from the rhetoric and consider some underlying principles. To improve access to our best universities you have to tackle five things, the most important of which is attainment in schools. Other important aspects include appropriate advice and guidance offered to school pupils, financial support for 16-18 year olds that need it most, ensuring universities' admissions processes are fair, and finally financial support for postgraduate, masters and PhD students to promote ongoing social mobility. It's obvious that tackling only one of the five – university admissions, for example – will be relatively ineffective and the suggestion that OFFA can make progress by imposing fines and other penalties on universities is missing the point. Effective fair access needs a comprehensive approach and one that focuses on innovation and collaboration, not penalties.

We take our responsibility for widening access extremely seriously and I am proud of our Access to Leeds scheme, which assesses a student's potential as well as their academic attainment. We are also doubling our investment (to £16m a year) in bursary and other financial support to ensure access for the brightest and best students from low-income families. But it's essential to balance this priority with another one we have – ensuring academic excellence. To ignore that would be short-sighted and benefit no-one, least of all the students from less-advantaged backgrounds.

I recently visited the Equality Service, and was reminded that we have an excellent reputation for supporting our disabled staff and students. The team is massively dedicated. Their responsibilities range from

supporting students experiencing mental health difficulties, to driving forward the equality and diversity agenda and assessing and delivering the study requirements of disabled students. Leeds is the only UK university to have an on-site transcription centre, which is managed jointly with the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB), and is something of which we should be particularly proud.

We are also fortunate to have one of the best staff development units in the country. I recently went to the Staff and Departmental Development Unit (SDDU) and met a highly-professional team dedicated to delivering excellence. They are doing great work in improving academic and other aspects of leadership among our current staff, which was more than evident during the recent school academic performance reviews. We found a cadre of relatively new colleagues on school management teams who are manifestly contributing to the future of our University in an impressive way.

Around campus, there is a sense of optimism about our future and achieving our ambitions. UCAS application figures were a morale booster, and reward our efforts on a number of fronts including the Open Days, the excellent performance in the National Student Survey (NSS), and our innovative student support package. While our overall applications fell 5.9%, we fared better than both the sector (down 7%) and our competitors (down 10% in some cases). If you take into account demographic changes – with a 2.6% fall in the number of 18-year-olds applying to university – the impact of increased fees looks relatively small, and as the Russell Group pointed out, applications to all universities are up 16% on three years ago.

Outperforming our direct northern Russell Group competitors – Sheffield, Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle – was particularly encouraging, but one contrasting and noteworthy observation was that applications to Nottingham rose this year compared to last. This may, in part, be attributable to their use of a centralised admissions process and

a customer relations management package which helps them to actively manage their interaction with prospective students.

We do not intend to slavishly follow Nottingham, but the Student Services Review, led by Viv Jones, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Student Education, will provide a framework for developing a unified process and a single supporting IT system for interacting with students across all aspects of their journey. We have made massive strides and more will follow.

Word that the Government's higher education bill has been kicked into the long grass was warmly welcomed by some critics of the government reform. My response to the news is broadly neutral. The White Paper on which the bill was based provided the opportunity to increase the powers of OFFA, and it also paved the way for a major expansion of private universities. Both policies were unceremoniously booted into touch in January and that outcome should be welcomed.

In contrast, others have voiced concern that such policies, and others, may now creep in under the radar. Another high-level concern is that without the bill, it is not clear that there are sufficient powers to control overall student numbers. This matters because the overall financial envelope is finite and if more money has to be found to fund uncontrolled student numbers and their support package, the most likely source is HEFCE funding and that would have an overall adverse impact on this University.

We must remain alert to what might happen and ensure our universities are properly funded and supported. The annual HEFCE funding letter released in January showed total funding from the Department of Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) for universities will fall from £6.5bn in 2011/12 to £5.3bn in 2012/13. This was expected, but is still unwelcome. Better news is that up to £1,100 will be made available for taught postgraduate courses, and also funding for strategically important and vulnerable subjects (SIVS) will be continued. This will help, but I remain concerned that the funding to teach science, engineering and technology undergraduates remains insufficient to meet the full costs of delivery.

It's been nearly two years since we launched our partnership with Marks & Spencer and announced that the retailer's archive would move to campus. Next month the Michael Marks Building, which houses the archive, plus exhibition, research and educational space, will open. The building is nothing short of spectacular and will be a great resource for education and research for our staff and students, M&S and the community. The partnership goes from strength to strength and is leading to other pieces of work of mutual benefit. The opening is another highly positive development for our University, which is firmly moving in the right direction.