

Leader column

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Achieving our potential in 2012

The much heralded 2012 has at last arrived and I'm delighted that it has started so well for us with a superb Student Education Conference that focused on 'Excellence', that made me feel very proud of everything that we are doing for our students. That is exactly the spirit in which we need to approach the considerable challenges and opportunities for higher education over the next year.

We start with sound finances despite the tough economic climate. Our annual report and accounts have now been published, and they show a rise in income of 5% to £543m and the transfer of a surplus to reserves of £37.8m. Assuming the coalition has no further surprises in store for us and we recruit our students to plan, we have a very solid platform from which to invest in further enhancing our student experience and in achieving our strategic ambitions.

While the most recent application figures for home/EU students show that we are in the order of 5% down compared to last year, they have certainly not collapsed completely, as some forecast. We deliberately factored in a 5% overall reduction in student recruitment as part of the Integrated Planning Exercise (IPE), with some of our schools opting strategically for an even greater reduction. This was good planning as it is amongst these schools that we have seen some of the larger decreases in applications. All things considered, we remain confident that we will recruit to planned student numbers this summer.

A key factor for the next phase of student recruitment for 2012 is for all schools to focus carefully on conversion activities. The scrapping of government quotas on recruiting students with AAB (at A level) means that the top applicants might be holding as many as four or five offers. We've got to work even harder to convince them to choose Leeds by making sure that they feel connected to us, and that through visits and other mechanisms that they are aware of all that we have to offer.

Another factor from which we may draw some comfort is the continuing strong

demand for places from international students, despite the recent visa changes. This presumably reflects the ongoing growth in the economies of India, China and other parts of South East Asia and signals that the desire for a high quality international student experience in a leading international university remains strong.

The Research Excellence Framework (REF) 2014 will also come into sharper focus this year as it is vitally important that we take plenty of time to carefully prepare a top class competitive submission that will help to secure our reputation as a leading research intensive university as well as our core government quality-rated (QR) funding. By starting now, colleagues will have enough time to complete 3* and 4* outputs ready for submission and we can all make careful and accurate decisions about which to submit. The shift in the funding landscape, with 2* outputs no longer rewarded, is a 'complete game-changer'. It has major implications for our future research strategy and for the careers of all our researchers. Although difficult to achieve, our future emphasis must be on an adequate volume of high quality (3* and 4*) research outputs, rather than a large volume of lower-rated work.

In the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) 2008, we opted for a grade point average (GPA) of 2.5 and achieved 2.72. We were rewarded with a position of 14th in GPA league tables and the 8th highest QR funding in the country. Allowing for grade inflation, we are now aiming for a GPA of 3.0 to propel us into the top ten. The REF is a snapshot of research excellence taken on a defined census date and whilst we expect the majority of our academic staff to be included, it is evident that some may not. We have clearly stated that, in and of itself, this will not adversely affect future career prospects. We intend to support those not submitted to develop their research profile for submission to the next REF after 2014.

The impact case studies are an important new element of REF 2014 with a big impact on reputation, GPA and finances. As a rough

guide, one 4* impact case study is worth about ten 4* papers in terms of funding. David Hogg and his team have already put tremendous effort into the impact case studies, but we would like to encourage all to actively seek out and bring forward our very best 'Impact' for consideration, constructive iteration and eventual submission. There are enormous gains to be made by getting this right – please contribute in any way that you can.

The start of a new year is also a great time to initiate our campaign to recruit more than 40 brilliant academics, able to integrate world-class learning and teaching with their international quality research. The Leadership Chairs are an integral part of improving the student experience for 2012 onwards, for REF 2014 and for our overall strategic ambition. The Deans and others have been working to identify the top two or three people in the world for each position in their faculty. We want only the best and we will leave no stone unturned in finding individuals of the right calibre to come to Leeds. It is our intention to emphasise the momentum and trajectory of the University, our research environment, facilities and ability to collaborate and work across disciplines coupled with our desire to succeed. We want appointed applicants to feel that they will be coming to a university where they can be highly successful and where their contribution will help to 'make a real difference'. Watch this space.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to congratulate two members of staff who have been recognised in the New Year's Honours list, Dr Kath Hodgson, MBE, our Director of Learning and Teaching Support and Peter Buckley, OBE, Professor of International Business. Both have given everything and more to the concept of academic excellence at the very highest level, as well as impressive dedication and commitment to this university. For that to be recognised externally leads me to conclude that 2012 has started very well indeed.