

## Leader column

# Staying on track to achieve our strategic ambitions

Against a background of changing student recruitment patterns, increased competition and financial pressure, it's all too easy to forget what a special place the University of Leeds is. I've been told that being given 8 out of 10 in Yorkshire actually equates to getting a 10 elsewhere in the country. My view is simple – we should be proud and give ourselves a 10, because we deserve it. Look at the levels of research income, the quality of our student education and student experience and the innovations we've made. Our University is making a huge difference to the city, the region, the country and the world in which we live, and we should recognise and celebrate that more often.

The achievements of our staff, students and partners weren't in any doubt during this year's Celebrate Week. Organised by Leeds University Union (LUU) and the University, the true joy that people showed when their hard work was recognised by their peers, students or fellow students, was fantastic and quite emotional. I could see people fighting back tears. I was privileged to attend four of the seven award ceremonies, including the Sports Colours which celebrated our students' sporting successes. There's something about excellent achievement in sport and excellent academic achievement that is synergistic. I'm very proud that we've got such wide participation in the country's university sporting activities and competitions, not to mention some exceptionally talented individual sports men and women amongst our students. Congratulations also to our sports coaches, who are a highly talented and dedicated team.

The other events at which I was a guest – the Partnership awards, the LeedsforLife Awards and LUU societies' event, The Riley's – served to underline the inspiring and varied nature of our University and its staff and students. I was honoured to be presented with a lifetime achievement award at The Riley's, recognition that I will treasure for the rest of my life. Thank you to LUU and to all our students – I was deeply moved by the award.

Our view of what this year's student recruitment – and therefore next year's funding – is going to look like, is getting clearer. Last year, for a variety of reasons, found us down on student numbers. Since then colleagues have put a massive amount of work into the recruitment process, particularly conversion activity. The outlook is a little bit better this year and we are cautiously optimistic, but student numbers are unlikely to recover completely and we will therefore continue to face financial pressure.

We are all aware of the big, externally-driven changes that have occurred in the last 12 months and the enormous impact they have had – and are still having – on the higher education (HE) sector. We're competing in a fierce marketplace for the very best students. Added to which, despite an inherent distrust of the methodology of some league tables, we are increasingly conscious that league table position is influencing student choice.

Together with senior colleagues, I've been taking stock of everything that's been going on, as well as the outcomes of the strategy discussions in Council, with the leaders of the University and in the open meetings held last year. What's very clear is that everybody wants to maintain the strategic ambition of being a leading, world-class university, integrating our research scholarship and education and continuing to aim towards the top 50 universities in the world, even though we all acknowledge that is a significant stretch target. What has become increasingly obvious, however, is that some change within the University is necessary to adjust ourselves to the new HE environment. Specifically, we need to ensure that, as the market takes root, we can continue to attract high-quality students to Leeds, and that we are sufficiently agile as an institution to be able to cope with the volatility that is inherent in the new environment. If we get all of this right, we can keep our long-term goals in mind and stay on track with our strategy.

For Schools, this means two things in particular, I think. First, they need to keep the emphasis on quality. This is the prerequisite, as one Head of School observed sagely in the last Senate, for creating the virtuous spiral that will enable us, in the new environment, to sustain excellence in research and student education, and at the same time ensure that the University remains a satisfying - and tolerable - community in which to work. The alternative, the vicious spiral of descent, is too grim to contemplate - but it is the risk if we take our eye off quality. To be blunt, if we don't actively strive to secure genuinely world-class standing, it will be difficult in this fast-changing environment to avoid sinking down the tables, making it still more difficult to recruit good students – and staff – and hence even more difficult to sustain our income streams. There are some interesting questions here, for example about the relationship between quality and quantity in student recruitment and about appropriate student-staff ratios.

The second consequence for Schools – and I make no apology for saying this – is that they need to become appropriately responsive to



the market. Different Schools will need different strategies to secure their sustainability, but all of them need to think creatively about curriculum development, and of ways of opening up and exploiting new income streams. For example, I doubt that we are currently doing enough to open up the market for international undergraduates.

Schools are addressing these kinds of question through the academic Integrated Planning Exercise (IPE). We have seen some significant thinking and innovation, and I have no doubt that this kind of planning will help us get in better shape, with more Schools in the position where they are excellent at both research and teaching and can attract very high-quality students.

In parallel, we have started to explore options, with external support, of how we might best configure and deliver the services that we need to support our new academic mission in this highly competitive environment. The quality of our services remains critical to our future, and we need to ensure not only that they are as efficient and effective as possible – that hardly needs saying – but also that they are agile, that we have flexibility across services in a way that perhaps we've not had before. This work, which will be completed by the autumn, is being overseen by the whole of VCEG, with the intention that Sir Alan Langlands, the new Vice-Chancellor, and the senior team can consider a range of options at the beginning of the next academic year, with implementation through next session. We'll be open and honest with everyone as we work through this process and will try to move to a settled position as quickly as we can.

The University of Leeds is an incredibly intellectually vibrant organisation. Once it accepts the need for change, it gets on with it and it does it extremely well. I'm absolutely convinced the University can find its way through the challenges we are facing and come out at the end with our strategy and ambition intact, more than ready to give ourselves 10 out of 10!