

Leader column

New beginnings

On 25 September 2013 – the first day of the academic year – the University will welcome an estimated 6,300 undergraduate students from the UK and the European Union, 600 students from other continents, 3,500 postgraduate taught students, 700 PhD students, post-docs, new faculty and professional staff and one new Vice-Chancellor. Each has received a warm welcome from a University that has a fine heritage, strong values and a commitment to academic excellence, and this is greatly appreciated.

I am proud to be the University's twelfth Vice-Chancellor and I will strive from the outset to serve the whole community well, sustaining an environment that advances the creation, diffusion and application of knowledge. This means a University that is enriching and inspiring for students, with a dynamic, internationally competitive research base and a vibrant PhD and post-doc community: an institution which has a positive economic, social and cultural influence on the city and the country. I envisage a self-confident University with a healthy respect for academic freedom and critical independent minds – a community of scholars committed to high standards and continuous improvement, willing to trumpet its successes.

These are very early days for me, with only tantalising glimpses of the University's work on arts and culture, human health, climate change and global society and business. I have also enjoyed brief visits to the Astbury Centre and stage@leeds, and I was impressed by the University's handling of a recent visit from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the energy generated by the Alumni and Development team and our students at the campaign weekend. I have a growing appreciation of the size, shape and dynamics of the campus and I have enjoyed my preliminary meetings with the deans and other senior staff. I hope to visit all schools and services in the coming months and strongly encourage staff and students to introduce themselves when I am out and about on campus.

Perhaps the most striking features for me so far are the University's commitment to learning and teaching of the highest quality, the success of the Leeds for Life approach, which fuses the academic and co-curricular experiences of our students, and the gold standard achieved by Leeds University Union and its compelling vision for student life and Partnership with the University. The University's commitment to spot talent early and to boost the aspirations,



attainment and achievement of students from challenging backgrounds is rightly a source of pride and we will continue to work with our alumni and supporters to encourage much-needed scholarship support and promote student enterprise and internship programmes.

The University is defined nationally and internationally by the quality of the education and research we provide and the talent we attract. As the world becomes smaller but more complex, serious research-intensive universities like Leeds have to be internationally competitive and collaborative. The mobility of people and programmes, the trend towards collaborative research and the interconnectedness of universities are already driving curriculum development and opening up wider research horizons. Despite the economic realities facing the country, international cooperation must not be defined solely in terms of financial opportunity or commercial diplomacy. There are more important issues at stake, which play to the altruism and expertise of the University.

Against the background of an expanding world population and an unfair distribution of resources, we have a responsibility to engage with climate change, global health challenges, and questions of energy, food and water security. We have to cast light on the social and economic impact of these issues, understanding the human and ethical implications of our responses and encouraging open and informed debate. We will also have to accommodate new technology with the potential to change the way we think about the acquisition of new knowledge, the way we learn and the way we assimilate and analyse large, interlinked data sets for research.

The University cannot be a passive observer in all of this – we should be willing to reach out to other parts of the world and be a significant international gathering point for these discussions. Existing initiatives like water@leeds are leading the way and others will follow.

These are some early thoughts from a new Vice-Chancellor who feels privileged to have such strong foundations to build on. To quote from Alvin Kernan's memoir *In Plato's Cave*, these ideas will have to be "smoothed against the grindstone of accumulated knowledge from the past and the real, present needs of an effective educational system". My challenge is to find the right balance between continuity and change – to maintain a line of sight to all that is good from the past whilst recognising the imperatives and the opportunities that will help us shape the future.

My final words of appreciation are reserved for Professor Michael Arthur who stepped down as Vice-Chancellor at the end of August to take up his new post at University College London. Michael has been a huge asset to the University and the city of Leeds over the past nine years – his achievements and the warmth of his personality will have enduring respect and he will always be welcome here. He has shown great personal kindness towards me in recent months and I look forward to working with him in the Russell Group and, hopefully, on other UK-wide projects.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Alan Langlands'.

Alan Langlands