

Leader column

Stimulating a new generation

News of the £19m Doctoral Training Partnership award from the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC) is a real boost to collaboration between the universities of Leeds, York and Sheffield.

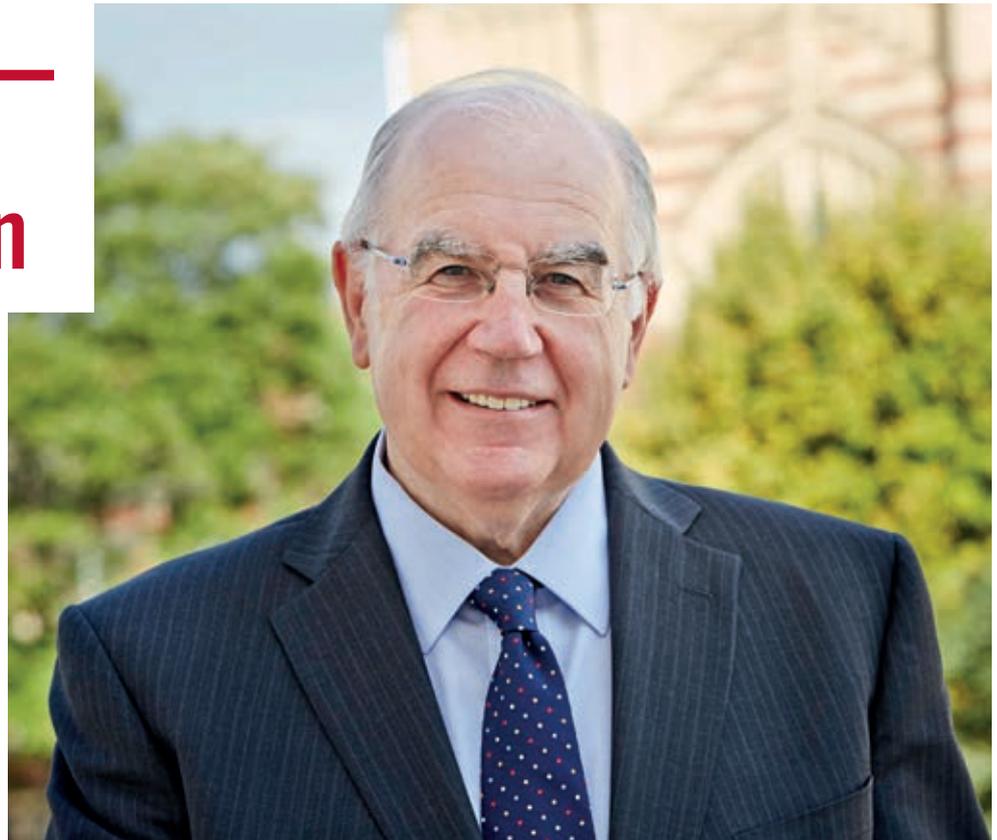
The funding will create the White Rose College of Arts and Humanities, which together with a further contribution of £4m from the three Universities, will see more than 300 fully-funded doctoral students recruited and trained over the next five years. The first cohort at Leeds will start in autumn 2014 across a wide spread of disciplines in the Faculties of Arts and Performance, Visual Arts and Communications. This prestigious award recognises the world-class strengths in the arts and humanities in Leeds and shows the power of collaboration in research, training and knowledge exchange.

Despite evidence to the contrary, there is still a tendency to see science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) subjects as the only key to national economic recovery, but the majority of UK students still choose to study the arts, humanities and social sciences, disciplines that help us to understand ourselves, our society and our place in the world.

Making the case for the public value of the arts, humanities and social sciences in the post-election spending review in 2010, Sir Adam Roberts – writing on behalf of the British Academy – asserted that:

“Each day thousands of gifted economists, lawyers, historians, linguists, philosophers, critics, geographers, sociologists, psychologists and anthropologists make important contributions to our shared public life – analysing the human and ethical implications of scientific and medical advances, exploring the social and economic impact of global issues such as climate change or international security, influencing new kinds of business innovation, uncovering new perspectives on our cultural heritage or undertaking reviews and enquiries which often lead to the revising or refocusing of public policy.”

As the University plays its part in grappling with the big issues of our time – human health, the impact of climate change on energy, food and



water security, the sustainability of our cities and the importance of cultural development – we are seeing exciting new education and research initiatives at the intersection between disciplines. The new generation of arts and humanities doctoral students and their colleagues in the Economic & Social Research Council-funded Social Science Doctoral Training Centre will have a wide range of opportunities to contribute to this growing sense of inter-disciplinarity and to advance the social and economic health, wealth and reputation of the UK. They will expect the University to be in the vanguard of new ways of working.

More than ten years ago, Lord (Bob) May, then President of the Royal Society, talked of finding answers across the *“the indivisible...continuum from the arts, humanities and social sciences through to the biological and physical sciences.”* Whilst some continue to patrol the boundaries between disciplines, this University is showing every sign of breaking them down, opening new educational and research opportunities and generating new ideas for industry and public policy. As we move beyond REF 2014, with the process of research assessment moving only slowly from its single-discipline origins, there is an opportunity to fashion a new research strategy which is ahead of the game and operates across the Leeds continuum. The trick is to do this without compromising our underlying disciplinary strengths.

The AHRC Doctoral Training Partnership award is also an important reminder of the power of collaboration across institutions.

Since 1997 the Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York, working with a range of partners from the private and public sector, both in the UK and overseas, have secured projects to the value of £130m. The University is also actively committed to working with the N8 (the eight most research intensive universities in the North of England) and is benefitting significantly from important research initiatives on the influence of arts and humanities on economic growth, the challenges of an ageing population and the drive for progress in nanotechnology, regenerative medicine and parasitology. The N8 is also leading the way in maximising the use of new and existing research assets, and there are important lessons here that will inform the development of new research platforms across disciplinary and university boundaries. Increasingly, the research infrastructure in universities is matching industry standards.

As I learn more about the work of the University and the can-do attitudes that are driving it, I am pleased to be part of a community that supports vibrant PhD and post-doc programmes, recognises the power of operating across the “indivisible continuum” and sees the positives in collaborating effectively with other universities. We will continue to build on these strengths for the future.

Alan Langlands