

Leader column

A good new year...

2014 is already off to a strong start with positive advances in research and student education. The European Parliament's seven year budget was ratified at the end of November 2013 and includes the sum of €79.4bn for Horizon 2020. This is a rare opportunity to tap into a growing funding stream for research, and of course the University has a good track record of 'winning' European funding. For the first time, the Commission has indicated funding priorities over two years, providing researchers with greater certainty on the direction of EU research policy.

Calls for the 2014 budget – worth around €7.8bn – are already open and include European Research Council grants for top scientists and Marie Curie fellowships for young researchers. Industry facing calls (€1.8bn) cover ICT, nanotechnologies, advanced manufacturing, robotics and biotechnology. €2.8bn is set aside for Horizon 2020's seven societal challenges in: health; agriculture, maritime and bioeconomy; energy; transport; climate action, environment, resource efficiency and raw materials; reflective societies; and security.

It is essential that we put our best foot forward in attracting Horizon 2020 funding while continuing to build on recent progress with the UK research councils and other funders. At the time of writing, there are important signs of progress in two major competitive bidding exercises. If successful, the first (with the Medical Research Council) will provide funding of at least £6m to develop an MRC Bioinformatics Centre at the University and the second (with the Economic and Social Research Council) will provide a similar level of funding to develop a Consumer Data Research Centre. Congratulations to Professor Sir Alex Markham and Professor Mark Birkin who led these bids and to a great many staff across the University who supported their development. Hopefully, success in these areas will provide a platform for a wider initiative on the development of big data research and associated educational initiatives, and joint working with a range of external academic, NHS and industry partners.

We are also building on the University's recent success in attracting research council funding for doctoral training centres in arts and

humanities and the environment and also the renewal of the Wellcome Trust PhD programme in biological sciences. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) has now announced funding for its Centres for Doctoral Training, including three at Leeds in the areas of bioenergy; fluid dynamics; and tissue engineering, regenerative medicine and bioengineering, with total allocations likely to be in the region of £11m. Again, I congratulate all concerned in achieving such a strong outcome.

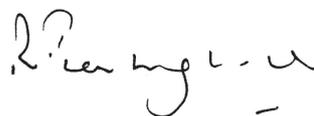
Meanwhile, the Student Education Service is developing apace, ensuring an equitable experience for all students across the whole life cycle of application, admission, study and co-curricular opportunities, and progression to employment or postgraduate study. The SES's commitment to provide training and development opportunities for staff and improved levels of support for the academic community will ensure strong foundations for the future.

We should take particular pride in the fact that we have continued to build on the University's commitment to spot talent early and to boost the aspirations, attainment and achievement of students from more challenging backgrounds. The University's most recent report to OFFA* and HEFCE on progress on access and widening participation tells a very positive story. Total spend on financial support, outreach and student support was nearly £13.5m in 2012/13; more than 'one in three' of our students received financial support; and first year full time entrants from low socio-economic groups was more than 22%, without any compromise on the level of attainment achieved by the students being recruited.

These successes and examples of innovative practice in curriculum development, quality enhancement, the use of new technology, and the importance of archives and special collections in educational development were discussed at the third annual student education conference. With almost 500 people crammed into the Rupert Beckett Lecture Theatre and with vibrant workshop and poster sessions, the conference provided an inspirational start to 2014.

Finally – and on a less positive note – (at the time of writing) there is still no sign of the government's grant letter to HEFCE. There are ominous signs of a further squeeze on HEFCE's teaching funding and perhaps new constraints on research funding, already starved of inflationary increases over the past five years. I will update the University as soon as more information is available but our aim should be to cope with any reductions without breaking stride.

Against this background, growth in opportunities in European research funding over the next seven years, success in interdisciplinary research and the development of our doctoral training centres, and the continued quest for excellence and innovation in every aspect of student education will be fundamental to the success of the University in moving forward.



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*Office for Fair Access.

