

Leader column

Think global, act local!

With some 2,000 delegates present, I recently contributed to the ninth Confucius Institute Conference in Xiamen. This global conference involves over 440 Confucius Institutes, together with Confucius Classrooms, and attendees included representatives from 126 countries and their Chinese partners. The main aims of the conference were to mark the progress of the institutes, share best practice, create new links within the network, and learn about the new language and cultural programmes being introduced by the institutes. I took this opportunity to reflect on the power, influence and intellectual rigour of universities as a means of strengthening Sino-British relationships, highlighting the importance of new education and research opportunities for staff and students and the need to ensure that these are underpinned by the principles and practice of academic freedom at all times.

Although only in its second year, our own Business Confucius Institute at the University of Leeds – developed in collaboration with the University for International Business and Economics in Beijing – has proved extremely successful, its popularity suggesting a real appetite for learning Mandarin and developing greater business and cultural links with China, both at the University and across the wider community in Yorkshire. Of course, this new venture builds on a 50-year commitment to excellence in Chinese Studies at Leeds, now nested in East Asian Studies in the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies. This diversification to embrace many other languages and cultures is of course consistent with the University's wider international ambitions.

I hope that our direct links with China will be further strengthened in 2015-16 by the Faculty of Engineering's proposed collaboration with Southwest Jiaotong University (SWJTU). The intention is to create a 'Joint School' that would allow up to 300 students per year to register for dual degrees from both SWJTU and Leeds. This initiative aims to increase the number of high-quality students that we recruit from China and to enhance our international research profile and collaborations. Subject to some final negotiations, the Joint School aims to start the student recruitment process in January, with admissions to new academic programmes – which start in September 2015 – in the Spring.

The founding of this Joint School has long been in the planning and represents another significant milestone in our approach to international partnerships and recruitment. As our first experience of implementing out-of-country provision on this scale, the project offers us an excellent institutional learning opportunity, consistent with the University's broader internationalisation strategy.



Peter Jimack, with strong support from his faculty, the international office and the marketing team, has developed this partnership with great care and deserves success.

Of course, as we reach out to form new academic partnerships across the world and commit to strengthening education, research, innovation and our economic, social and cultural ties with the Leeds City Region, we need to ensure that we have a fit-for-purpose campus. With Beechgrove Plaza providing a new focus to the eastern entrance of campus and the Laidlaw Library nearing completion, we are on the right track. The pace of change will accelerate in 2015 as we undertake a major programme of building and refurbishment work. Taking into account the University's strategic objectives, key projects have been prioritised and several are already advanced in construction, design or feasibility terms.

The first half of the year will see the School of Geography relocate to larger premises in refurbished areas of the Garstang, Manton and Miall Buildings. It will share existing teaching laboratories with Biological Sciences and have new, expanded facilities to support top flight research. Also due for completion is the link between the Psychology building and its annex at 41 University Road. This will foster a strong community of postgraduate students, currently accommodated in the annex, and improve the provision of staff offices and flexible teaching and meeting spaces. Likewise, the refurbishment of the School of Mathematics – striving to be one of the strongest in the UK – will provide new working areas for academic staff and students. The accommodation for the state-of-the-art Leeds Institute of Data Analytics is also progressing well, and work has started on the multi-storey car park which will be situated on the south side of the EC Stoner Building.

Other projects in the pipeline include the relocation of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies to the current Geography building; consolidation and refurbishment for the School of Medicine, releasing space for expansion of Leeds University Business School on the western campus; a substantial upgrade of the Edward Boyle Library; refurbishment and expansion of Leeds University Union; some new facilities for the Institute for Transport Studies; and extensive refurbishment of three floors in the Engineering building, leading on to a major development to link engineering and

physical sciences in the north-east quarter of the University.

Already open and fully functioning is our new, government-backed centre in robot design and construction in the School of Mechanical Engineering, which is of huge potential importance. The Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council National Facility for Innovative Robotic Systems has the most advanced suite of robot building equipment in the UK and is expected to become a key centre for robotics in the North. It brings together academics from the University's faculties of Engineering, Mathematics and Physical Sciences, Medicine and Health, and Environment. Key objectives will be to make new appointments in this area and to form partnerships with companies interested in developing cutting edge robotics technology.

The Medical Research Council, too, has committed £6.8m to a new imaging research centre to be based at Leeds and the University of York, which aims to change the diagnosis and treatment of patients with heart disease, cancer and musculoskeletal disease. The University will also receive a further £1.1m grant to explore how cells operate and evolve as a result of disease. Of course I look forward to more announcements of a similar nature in the coming year!

And, finally, to the REF, dubbed by a colleague as "nerve-racking but necessary". The results will be made public on 18 December; they will be pored over, analysed and digested, and will of course influence the further refinement and implementation of our research strategy. I anticipate that there will be cause for optimism but, naturally, there will also be areas where action is needed to ensure that we do better in the future. Thankfully, there is a well-deserved seasonal break to enjoy before that work and the other challenges that 2015 will bring. I therefore wish you and your families and friends a peaceful, relaxing and restorative break over the next couple of weeks and take this opportunity to thank you all for your hard work and dedication to the University.

Alan Langlands