

Leader column

Research Excellence Framework results provide firm foundation for the future

With the immediate excitement surrounding the results of the 2014 Research Excellence Framework (REF) now over, I have taken time to talk to University and sector colleagues and reflect on the outcome and what it means for Leeds. The overall feeling is that it confirms the University as a force to be reckoned with, placing us as one of the UK's top 10 universities for research power and well above our peer group average for the impact of our research.

I'd like to thank our academic and professional services staff for all their hard work over many years that has contributed to the results. A huge amount of effort went into the assessment – both within the University and, as several of our academics sat on REF panels, externally – and colleagues should be congratulated and thanked for their commitment and energy.

During my time at the Higher Education Funding Council for England I lived through the controversy of whether or not an impact element should be included in the 2014 submissions. In the event, this accounted for 20% of the overall score, together with outputs (65%) and environment (15%). This new requirement caused a lot of extra work for many institutions, but our own determination and commitment to show the tangible effects of Leeds research has been rewarded by a particularly strong performance in research impact. Our Impact Grade Point Average (GPA) score of 3.47 puts us above the Russell Group average of 3.44 – unequivocal proof that research carried out at Leeds has real benefits outside academia, in areas such as the economy, healthcare, public policy, civil society or culture.

Two very different examples – one local and one international – spring to mind to illustrate the breadth of our research impact. In the first, researchers from our Faculty of Performance, Visual Arts and Communications traced the artist JMW Turner's many visits to Yorkshire, the first of which took place in 1797. Using Google Earth's GPS technology they accurately identified the viewing points and locations depicted by Turner. This research led the official tourist agency, Welcome to Yorkshire, to launch a 'Discover Turner's Yorkshire' initiative featuring the Turner



Trail, an interactive map, and website. In just one year an estimated 1.25 million visitors saw the Trail's interpretation boards and visitors to Trail locations spent an average £119 per head. A survey of tourism businesses revealed that over half believe that the project had a positive impact on their business.

The example of our international impact took place far from Yorkshire, and saw our academics working to protect priceless biodiversity in the Galapagos Islands. Their research into how new diseases are potentially introduced to the islands led to changes in legislation and new biosecurity measures to protect the unique biodiversity of the archipelago. One area of the research showed that mosquitoes hitching a ride on airliners were the biggest risk for introducing viruses. A suite of measures was recommended to reduce this risk, including the use of insecticide treatments on all aircraft flying to Galapagos, bans on direct international flights to Galapagos and restrictions on the point of origin for all flights. These measures led to Galapagos being removed from UNESCO's List of World Heritage in Danger.

Of course, these are just two examples of a wide spectrum of research that has had far-reaching impact* and the REF results confirmed the University's excellence in several key areas.** What I also found particularly striking and pleasing about the results was that they highlighted the overall strength of the institution, and the impressive breadth and depth of our research. We did well in every assessment area to which we submitted; our institutional GPA increased to 3.13 (it was 2.72 in RAE2008), and 82.76% of our research is now rated 4 star or 3 star (60.8% in 2008) – meaning it is world-leading or internationally excellent.

Nationally, the results were characterised by a general improvement across the sector: the average proportion of the outputs judged to be 4 star rose from 14% in 2008 to 22%, and the average proportion judged to be 3

star from 37% to 50%. According to HEFCE, these changes are consistent with independent evidence about the improved performance of UK research in international comparative terms.

Another related feature is the extremely small margins between the rankings; just 0.27 separates us from the highest institution in the overall GPA ranking. This highlights the extremely competitive nature of the current HE environment, and emphasises the hard work that must continue if we are to build on our 2014 REF results.

Initiatives such as the recruitment of 250 University Academic Fellows and 220 new PhD studentships are now in place, and the Strategic Plan is firmly aligned to increasing our research funding and power. Through the plan we are identifying and addressing how we can further improve our future research performance and consistency, and we have clear plans and targets to increase the range and volume of world-leading research. Our substantial investment in three key areas – people, infrastructure, and the means to tackle global challenges – will help us build on our existing success. The aim is to ensure that REF2020 will produce a much stronger result for Leeds and we will use the forthcoming integrated planning exercise (IPE) meetings to agree any further actions needed to achieve progress over the next five years.

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* Read more case studies at goo.gl/vwOXFq

**The following areas are all ranked in the top 10 in the UK by overall Grade Point Average: Business and Management Studies, Environmental Sciences, Mathematical Sciences, Theology and Religious Studies, Sports and Exercise Sciences, Mechanical Engineering, Electrical and Electronic Engineering, Civil Engineering, Law, and Communication and Media Studies.