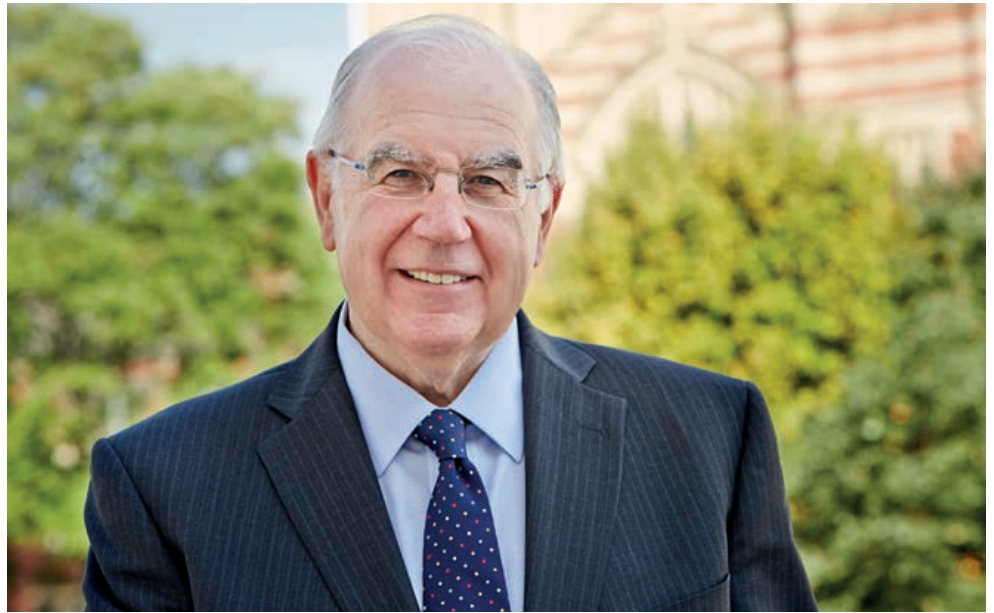


Leader column

Election uncertainty but Leeds is prepared for the future



We normally associate Spring and early Summer with the joys of Celebrate Week, the trials and tribulations of exam time and the anticipation of graduation...this year we also face the uncertainties of one of the most hotly contested General Elections in history...

The outcome of May's UK General Election could have far-reaching consequences for higher education. Conservative plans include significant savings in public spending, estimated at £30 billion, including £13 billion in cuts from departmental budgets, as set out in the most recent budget. The Labour Party has announced plans to reduce the cap on home/EU undergraduate student tuition fees from £9,000 to £6,000 if elected to government. The party has given assurances that universities would not be financially disadvantaged by the change in fee structure: it says that the annual teaching grant that is awarded to universities would be increased by £2.7 billion to make up the expected shortfall in income.

The proposed reduction in tuition fees underlines the uncertainty facing the sector. The present government's decision to lift the cap on tuition fees to £9,000 in 2012 was contentious at that time, and, while many still hold serious reservations about the increase, it did nevertheless give universities some autonomy over a key source of income. Universities UK has welcomed the assurances that the teaching grant would rise to compensate for the fall in fee income if Labour is elected. However, most commentators have also expressed concern that the change could lead to pressure being placed on funding which is currently allocated to universities through Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) funding for research, innovation, STEM subjects and social mobility.

Politics aside, it is clear that the underlying weakness in the public finances and the requirement for a sensible fiscal response will be one of the most difficult issues in the in-tray of the new government. University funding will therefore be subject to intense scrutiny in the post-election comprehensive spending review,

and it is imperative that our negotiators put forward positive arguments based on the well-evidenced social benefits of higher education. Our sector must surely be seen as part of the growth story and not the austerity story.

No matter what the outcome of these political and funding machinations, the University will hold fast to its strategic plan – delivering outstanding education, opportunities for all-round personal growth, and world-class research and innovation across a wide range of academic disciplines. We will also continue to invest in the expertise and professionalism of our staff and the energy, enthusiasm and talent of our students. However, in a more challenging financial environment, and given some disappointment with the recent REF results, we must also accept that long-term success will require determined action to increase academic quality and power even further. This means that we will have to realise the benefits from our current investments, increase the proportion of staff submitted in REF2020 with 3 and 4* publications, grow international and postgraduate education, and continue to improve graduate employability.

Our recent achievements give me confidence that all of this is possible. The recent launch of the Leeds Curriculum is an important landmark, building on research-based learning and the tradition of final year projects; the core threads of global and cultural insight, ethics and responsibility, and employability; and the development of the 10 new interdisciplinary Discovery Themes. Our investment, too, in a new, admissions process to be launched shortly, is a major step towards transforming the way the University builds and maintains relationships with prospective, current and former students.*

With 16 students participating in the British Conference of Research – with projects as varied as 'Clouds : Analysing CMIPS model reliability and quantifying the effects on radioactive forcing' and 'Trafficking the "exotic": damaging representations of women of colour in the sex industry' – and great success in recent national competitions for Chinese and Japanese language, Leeds students are up for change and challenge.

Through the N8 Agri-Food Resilience Programme, Leeds researchers have played a key role in the successful £16 million (£8 million from HEFCE and £8 million from N8 partners) catalyst grant to promote research and innovation in food security. This programme fits with key research council and Innovate UK strategies and should lever additional research funding from these sources and from industry partners. (See the article on page 8 for more details of this and another key N8 grant.)

The General Election may be casting a shadow of uncertainty for the moment but Leeds students and staff know how to lift the mood. With your inspiration and backing we can find a path through the next five-year fixed term Parliament without breaking stride.

Alan Langlands

*See the article opposite for more information.