

Leader column

Working together for Leeds

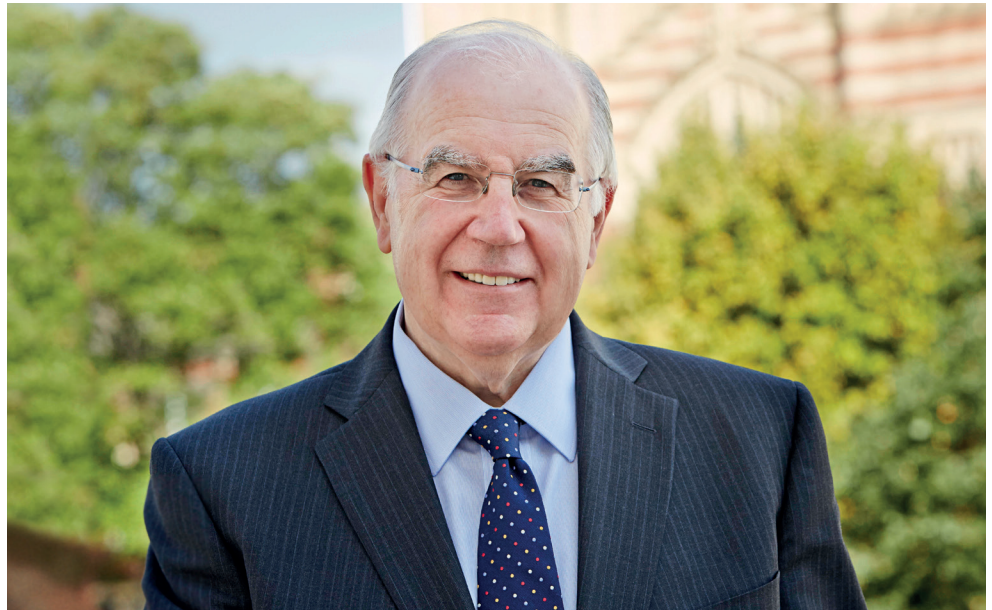
The new Conservative government has announced that it intends to implement its election manifesto in full. A number of policies included in the manifesto could significantly affect the financial and regulatory environment in which the UK's universities operate...but none of this should distract attention from our pursuit of academic excellence and the economic, social and cultural contributions we can make to the City, the Leeds City Region and the country as a whole.

The fiscal constraints facing the government coupled to a series of pre-election pledges on taxation and spending in protected departments such as health, mean that the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – which ultimately controls university spending – will be expected to take its share of financial savings. This will put education and research budgets under increasing strain over the next five years. Other elements of the government programme on immigration, the review of research councils and Europe will also present new challenges.

An in-out referendum on the UK's continued membership of the European Union will take place by 2017 at the latest. The UK's higher education institutions are the largest recipients of research funding from the EU, benefiting to the tune of £1.2 billion every year. Considerable financial support is also made available from Brussels for educational schemes such as the Erasmus programme and various postdoctoral study programmes.

Membership of the EU also provides easier access to a pool of talented staff and students from which to recruit, and facilitates the development of research networks and industrial partnerships with universities, businesses and other organisations across Europe. For these reasons, Universities UK (UUK) has indicated that it intends to make a strong case for the UK's continued membership of the EU in the coming months, as part of what will undoubtedly be a lively and impassioned national debate.

Our University benefits significantly from EU funding and we will do all that it can to maintain effective working relationships with the European Research Council and other EU bodies during this period of uncertainty. To ensure that we can respond rapidly to changing circumstances and that our voice is heard, we are combining with the Universities of Sheffield and York as part of the White Rose Consortium to open a small office in Brussels. This will be up and running shortly and will take us closer to the action at a critical time for UK/EU relationships.



Closer to home – and beyond our bottom line requirements to meet the needs and aspirations of students and to boost the quality, volume and impact of our research – we are firmly committed to working in partnership with industry, Leeds City Council, the Local Enterprise Partnership, the NHS, cultural organisations and the third sector. A strong foundation locally will give us the self confidence to look outwards.

For example, Leeds City Council, local NHS Trusts, clinical commissioning groups and the three universities in the city have agreed to work together. This new Academic Health Partnership (AHP) will harness academic, clinical and professional expertise to improve health and social care outcomes, reduce inequalities, prepare the future health and social care workforce and drive economic growth. The AHP is a long-term commitment to the people of Leeds, and the University has played a central role in forging this new way forward. The prospect for international collaborations down the line are enormous.

Equally important are the University's ambitious plans to develop a Cultural Institute which will add to the vibrancy of the cultural community and the creative industries at regional, national and international level. Proposals which build on the cultural traditions of the University are being developed by Professors Frank Finlay and David Cooper in consultation with a wide range of colleagues – both internal and external – and will be available in the autumn.

Plans for a University Innovation and Enterprise Centre (UIEC) are also progressing apace. This will provide a gateway to the best of our research, driving innovation in existing companies and the public sector, and stimulating the start-up of new high growth firms. The University will also play a leading role in providing unified support for innovation in regional small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), drawing on our national top 10 position for impact and working in collaboration with other universities and the Local Enterprise Partnership in the Leeds City Region.

Plans to increase the number of PhD studentships and to build a thriving community of young academics are also moving forward. Very soon we will announce an extension of the 110 Anniversary studentship scheme and the next cohort of University Academic Fellowships will be advertised as part of our ambitious '250 Great Minds' scheme, which is designed to attract talented individuals to establish an academic career at Leeds and play a key role in our ambitious plans for the future. Look out for further information published on 250greatminds.leeds.ac.uk

In the meantime, I am pleased to welcome our excellent new PhD students and the new University Academic Fellows, some who have already joined us and many more who take up post around the beginning of the academic year. To date, we have appointed over 70 outstanding individuals, including internal candidates and others from prestigious institutions like Harvard, Cambridge, ETH Zurich, Oxford, Princeton, Bristol, MIT, Edinburgh and Max Planck Institutes. All of them are people with the potential to make a major contribution to the University's long term academic performance and reputation, and we are delighted they have chosen to join us at Leeds.

The University has lived through 30 General Elections and many recessions in the past 111 years and yet we are still here to tell the tale – a tale of academic excellence, growth and development. As we continue on this path, in a world that is reducing in size but growing in complexity, we have to look outwards and we have to work in partnership locally, nationally and internationally to sustain excellence through a fully integrated approach to education and research and by playing our part in economic, social and cultural development.

Alan Langlands