

Leader column

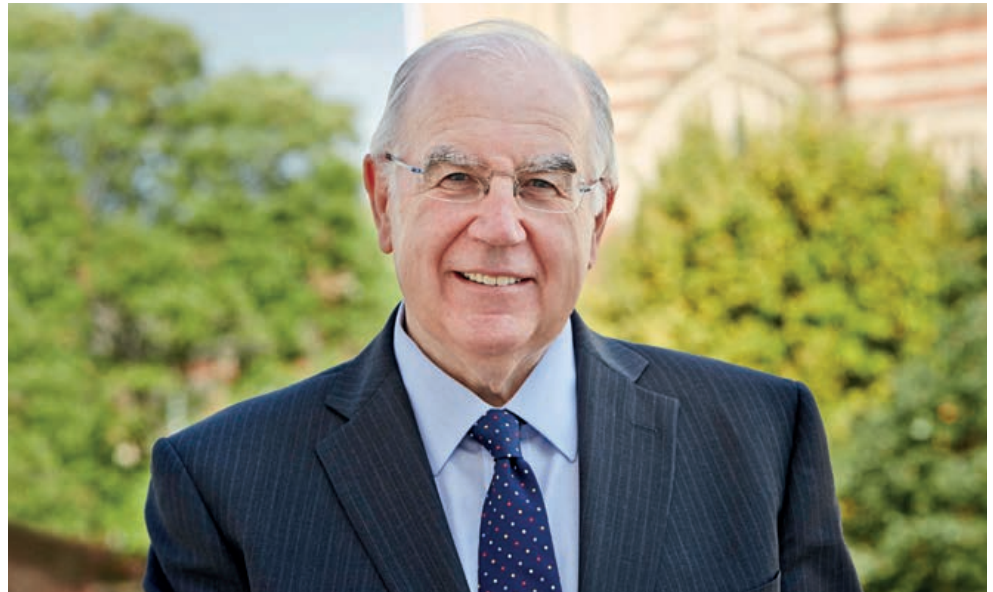
...a new year beckons

At the dawn of academic year 2015-16, we welcome our new undergraduate and postgraduate students and our new PhD students and academic fellows to the University – a community committed to providing outstanding education and a step change in the quality, volume and impact of our world leading research; one that takes its responsibility to support the economic, social and cultural development of the Leeds City Region seriously.

There have been many highlights over the summer and I was particularly pleased that the University has maintained its pattern of improvement in the National Student Survey which provides key benchmark indicators of student satisfaction. Within the Russell Group we have moved from joint 11th to joint third, with 90% of our students satisfied with the quality of their course. We are second only to Oxford with 92% satisfaction for 'teaching on my course' and joint second for 'assessment and feedback'. We are in the top five across the other 20 question categories in the survey, the only Russell Group University to achieve this level of consistency. Satisfaction with the library service (94%) and the Students' Union (92%) are also at a record high.

These are not flash in the pan results. They are the result of tremendous work by Viv Jones and her team in the Student Education Service and, of course, they reflect the absolute focus of every member of staff at the University on meeting the needs and aspirations of students, present and future. They also build on the foundations of the Leeds Curriculum and LeedsforLife which give students outstanding academic and co-curricular opportunities; the strength of our Partnership with the Students' Union and the wider student body; and our commitment to recruit and retain high quality students from diverse backgrounds, providing affordable access for all who can benefit – also a great success story over the summer. Further improvements to promote student employability and the development of the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence and Innovation during 2015-16 will ensure that we continue to build on these successes.

The only major setback over the summer was the Government's decision to convert student support grants to loans, adding still further to the scale of the student loans required to support undergraduate education. Higher education benefits the economy, society and individual students. Student loans must not become the only release valve for dealing with short term government spending cuts and increasing costs in higher education. This does not make long term sense for the taxpayer, and switches far too much



of the cost burden to students. As the economy recovers and grows, there has to be a much fairer balance between public funding for higher education and the costs incurred by individual students.

The wider economic, social and cultural contributions of the University will be an important theme for academic year 2015-16. On 18 November, we will be holding an event on campus to show how the University plays a crucial role in modern life, with positive impacts not only in the Leeds City Region but right across the world. We will explain our direct and indirect economic contribution and showcase our ground-breaking work in a number of key areas – from health to energy, robotics to food, big data to culture, skills, employment and much more.

I also take great pride in the tradition of social responsibility in Leeds. To take the example of student volunteering, since 1998, some 4,800 students have supported 220 schools in the Leeds City Region. Every year, we have 3,000 active student volunteers who give time and skills to help more than 150 charities, and our students and student groups raise around £300,000 for local charities – contributions of which we can be justly proud.

This approach is drawn into sharp relief by the ongoing migrant crisis. I know that many of you have already responded to the international migrant crisis, however, a significant number of students and staff have asked me how the University might play a part. We have discussed the crisis with the City Council and have joined a city task force established to ensure a coordinated response to the crisis, and are working with the Students' Union to see how we can support their activities and develop joint volunteering initiatives.

We already have in place a fund to support students that have been affected by catastrophic events in their home countries. In addition, we are examining how we might provide a number of funded scholarships. I have no doubt that our thinking will be sharpened as the local and national picture becomes clearer. In the

meantime, we will keep staff up-to-date with developments through the For Staff website.

Finally, in a year when we intend to launch our new cultural institute, I want to reflect on the Leeds International Piano Competition (LIPC). For more than 50 years one woman, Dame Fanny Waterman as Chairman and Artistic Director of LIPC and as a teacher, has helped many thousands of young people fulfil their promise. She has guided the 'Leeds' to great things with integrity, passion, charisma and an unfailing capacity for hard work. She is a great friend and supporter of this University and will remain so long into the future.

The 18th competition held over the past 54 years energised the campus for almost three weeks. It culminated in a wonderful gala concert in the Great Hall, where the six finalists played to a full house and the competition winner Anna Tcybuleva captivated us all with her virtuosity, musicality, technical ability and sheer presence.

The 'Leeds' is arguably the finest piano competition in the world and the only one to have such close links with a major university. This is not only about sharing our resources and accommodation, although these things matter. The real point is that we share common strengths and values: a commitment to quality, high standards and professionalism; strong local roots and worldwide reach; and integrity – for LIPC, the judging system and for the University, the quality of our degrees. The preparation of bright and talented young people, regardless of their background, to advance their careers and make their way in a complex, highly competitive and often troubled global environment – one that is full of challenge but also full of promise – is a common objective. The world needs a new generation of artists, professionals, creative thinkers and problem solvers.

Alan Langlands