

## Leader column

# Making the case for intelligent reform

We are already in the swing of 2016 – teaching has started, this year's first tranche of examinations is complete, Senate has met, and nominations for the student executive are open. Once again it will be a busy year. It could also see the beginning of significant changes for higher education in the UK.

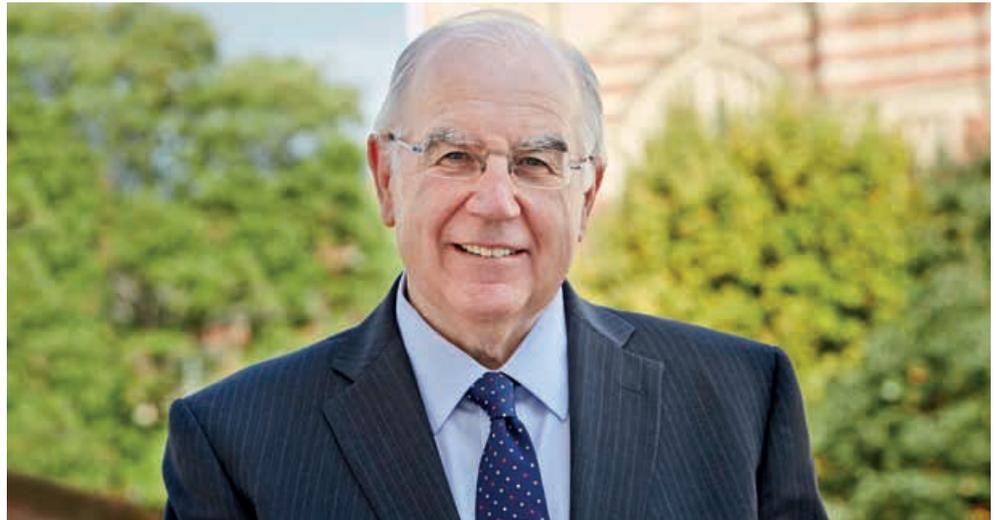
As outlined in my last column, we have been preparing – and have now submitted – our response to the Government Green Paper on higher education and you can read it on the For Staff website. We agreed with the broad sweep of the detailed responses made by the Russell Group and UUK and confined our response to key questions on the oversight of universities at national level, the Government's intention to open up the sector to new entrants, the teaching excellence framework, and the dual support system of research funding.

I have no doubt that the Government's proposals have been formulated with the best of intentions and we support the core aims of the Green Paper – to raise teaching standards, boost graduate employability, widen participation and encourage new high-quality entrants. However, we do have some key points of difference on how intelligent reform might be delivered.

The existing legislation has worked well for almost 25 years and has supported the development of world-leading higher education and research. The principles of university autonomy and academic freedom are key to this and must be maintained. The Green Paper proposes splitting the regulation, funding and oversight of teaching and research, potentially between several different bodies. We believe that this is fundamentally wrong as it would fragment and overcomplicate the engagement between Government and universities. It risks an unnecessary division between education and research and increased transaction costs.

The distinctiveness of a university education depends on the symbiotic relationship between teaching and research; research-led education enhances the student experience and prepares high quality graduates for employment. We recommend that any new national body should operate a 'whole system' approach to regulation, funding and oversight, enabling a coherent approach to improvement in undergraduate and postgraduate education, research and innovation.

The Green Paper also implies some relaxation of the requirements for new entrants to the sector. University Title is precious and valuable – the criteria and process for obtaining this need to be rigorous, focusing on key questions of academic



standards and quality; access and participation; transparency and provision of information for students and the wider public; the effective handling of student complaints and redress; and questions of financial sustainability and good governance.

We welcome the principles behind the introduction of a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). However, teaching excellence must incorporate and reflect diversity, be the sum of many factors and chime with the varying perceptions of students, institutions and employers. The TEF should be a mechanism for enhancing teaching excellence and building on the global reputation of UK universities. The suggested ranking system needs further development work, whilst the measurement of 'learning gain' is in its infancy and needs to develop further before it can be used reliably. The University supports a model of co-development where universities and policy makers can work together to develop and test new arrangements over time.

We do not support linking fees to the TEF. The idea that teaching excellence is driven by increasing income misjudges the importance of partnership working and trust between universities and their students – students have a right to high quality education in every institution trusted with University Title. Future fee levels and the overall balance of private and public investment in higher education is a matter of much wider societal interest.

Finally, quality-related research funding enables universities to maintain a dynamic and responsive research base. It provides much needed flexibility to invest in new areas of research, to encourage new partnerships and interdisciplinary working and to support a vibrant PhD and postdoctoral community and must be protected.

Back on campus, the quality of teaching at Leeds was showcased earlier this month at the fifth Student Education Conference (SEC)\*. There are very few universities that could hold such a conference on this scale and no other that could mount such a rich and diverse programme. This year's theme of 'Evidencing Excellence' was timely, and the

idea of preceding the conference with a Digital Festival was inspired. Discussing and exploring ways in which to evidence excellence, whilst giving people the opportunity to discover more about technologies that can help do this, was a powerful combination. SEC also saw the launch of the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence and Innovation. This is a tangible commitment to position Leeds as an international leader in the pedagogy and scholarship of research-led education and research based learning. I have high hopes for its development as a centre for the dissemination of innovative teaching practices.

Together with other colleagues, I was also delighted to attend Leeds University Union's (LUU) presentation on the considerable impact they have made over the past year, focusing on four key areas – empowering, enriching and inspiring students and driving LUU into the future. Executive officers Toke Dahler and Mels Owusu gave an overview of some of their major successes, such as the 90% of taught postgraduate students who feel positive about LUU, the 24,000 club and society memberships created during the year, and the 1,000 students who have gained employment or work experience through the union. Suffice to say that the event underlined the huge importance of LUU to the University and the overall student experience at Leeds.

Their achievements are tremendous, and reflect the engagement, enthusiasm and determination that are the defining characteristics of the Leeds student body. I know that the strength of The Partnership, in particular, is much admired – not just within the University but by our peers in other UK institutions – and I am very much looking forward to continuing our work together.

2016 holds the promise of being another good year for the University and I look forward to it with excitement and enthusiasm.

Vice-Chancellor Sir Alan Langlands

\*See pages 8 and 9 for more details of the SEC and LITEI.