

Leader column

Looking Brexit in the teeth

So the public have spoken: the UK has voted to leave the EU.

The result has come as a shock to a great many people and the divisive nature of the campaign was unedifying and unnecessary. The political fallout is game-changing and the economic and social implications will not be fully understood for some considerable time.

Whatever our views on the rights and wrongs, we now have certainty on the decision. We don't have certainty on what happens next. With all the noise surrounding the outcome – one commentator remarked that it's coming to something when the resignation of the Prime Minister isn't the top item on the news – it is easy to dwell on the downside.

I am clear that as a university we have some very significant challenges ahead as a result of the vote, but with clarity, purpose and a willingness to work with others, I know that we can meet them head on and adapt and prosper in the new circumstances in which we find ourselves.

The University is resilient and we have shown before that we can adjust to unexpected political, economic and social challenges. As an institution we have survived two world wars and much more.

While we seem to have some time on our side – article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty foresees a two-year negotiation process and it is far from clear when the starting pistol will be fired – it is difficult to judge the behaviour of politicians and colleagues in other EU countries. They may assume that out means out – we need to keep in close contact with them and we will.

There are already some supportive noises coming from Brussels, at least in relation to the medium term. European Commissioner Carlos Moedas has stressed that we remain eligible for Horizon 2020 funding, that EU laws still apply and we retain all the rights and obligations of a member state.

I know that there have also been positive meetings between the President of the European Research Council Jean-Pierre Bourguignon and representatives of UK universities.

I also know that we have built up strong relationships with EU partners which won't just evaporate overnight, although we are keeping a very close eye on the status of funding bids.

As for defining the challenges, there are three clear priorities: the immigration status of staff and students (including freedom of movement); access to funding and finance for EU students; and the impact of the vote on science, research and innovation.



It is important to stress that in law nothing changed overnight on 23/24 June.

We remain in the European Research Area and Horizon 2020 funding continues to flow, with existing projects, project grants and contracts expected to be honoured. Current EU students and those joining us in September will still pay the same fees as domestic students, while continuing to have access to student loans. And the immigration status of staff, students and those participating in the Erasmus programme remains unchanged for now.

That said, we do need clarity on a whole range of issues, including the longer-term status of EU staff and students; how the University might continue to access EU funding programmes and networks on favourable terms; and whether or not the UK Government will make up any shortfall in research funding stemming from the new arrangements.

This isn't just about seeking answers. It is about shaping solutions – working to influence the inevitable trade-off between access to the single market and the free movement of people and pressing for a new, more enlightened immigration policy which benefits universities and makes all overseas staff and students feel welcome in our country.

We must look for the positives while dealing with the challenges and begin the process of reimagining a university that is outside the EU but still European, still international and still inclusive.

We don't start from a blank sheet of paper; there are precedents. For example, Norway has associated status in relation to Horizon 2020, whereby researchers can still access funding subject to certain stipulations.

As a university, we have a choice: we can either sit back and let decisions be made for us, or we can work with our peers across higher education to help determine the new environment and seize new opportunities as they arise.

We will choose the latter course. For example, we must ensure that we are arguing for effective measures to support growth in the forthcoming national research and innovation strategy.

We must redouble our efforts to secure high-quality collaborative research projects with our colleagues in Europe. And we must ensure that we offer an intellectually stimulating, fully rounded

student experience which will continue to attract the most able and committed students from all around the world.

Some of this may seem like a technocratic response but we must not underestimate the human aspects of the referendum. Calling on the government to guarantee the residency of EU citizens in the UK, Sir Venki Ramakrishnan, the President of the Royal Society (who visited Leeds on 24 June and spoke powerfully on this issue), said: "These are real people with families and careers to think about, and they will be much sought after by other countries".

Since the vote I have heard from students and staff who are uncertain, confused or upset by what has happened. The whole University community owes it to them to lobby government for rapid progress on questions of immigration and citizenship.

Universities are more than places of learning and discovery; they are communities in their own right, with their own values and principles. At Leeds we ensure that everyone is treated equally, with fairness, dignity and respect. I want to reassure every member of staff and every student that this will not change. We will continue to build on our reputation as an international university in a compassionate, outward-looking city.

We welcome the most insightful and enquiring minds, regardless of nationality or jurisdiction. This approach has served us well for the past 112 years and will continue to serve us well for the next 112.

If we stay true to our principles – and we will – I am confident that we can meet the very real challenges ahead and that we will grow and prosper in this post-Brexit world, promoting internationally excellent education and research, and ensuring that our economic, social and cultural influence makes a real difference in the world.

Vice-Chancellor Sir Alan Langlands

For more information on what the outcome of the vote might mean for staff and for regular updates go to www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff
For information and updates aimed at current and prospective EU students go to www.leeds.ac.uk/eureferendum