

Leader column

Focusing on What Matters...

One of the many great things about our University is the sense of new beginnings at the start of every academic year, as we are joined by around 11,000 new staff and students. Their energy, commitment and inspiration bring a real feeling of renewal, but also continuity as they begin to play their part in building the future.

Among the 11,000 newcomers are Professors Lisa Roberts, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research and Innovation, Tom Ward, Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Student Education and Hai-Sui Yu, Pro-Vice-Chancellor: International. All three bring vast experience, imagination and drive and will be instrumental in helping us achieve our ambitions.

The feeling of optimism and opportunity all of this engenders is enhanced this year by the fact that we have just been named the Times and Sunday Times University of the Year. The award is among the most respected and high profile in the sector and is clear recognition of our success in developing future generations of independent, critical thinkers and delivering cutting-edge research of real impact and significance.

Of course, the real trick is to do both in combination, so that research underpins education and vice versa. Our ability to do this so successfully is genuinely distinctive amongst our peers and is a driver for the unparalleled investments in people, research platforms and student facilities that we are currently making.

So there is much to celebrate, to be excited about and to build on. It is essential that we remain focused on achieving excellence in student education and research, especially given all the external noise emanating from the Government's higher education reforms and the ramifications of the Brexit vote.

That said, we can't completely ignore these external factors. I recently appeared before the Parliamentary committee that is scrutinising the Higher Education and Research Bill. While there are a number of good intentions behind the Bill, the devil is inevitably in the drafting and my main point was to warn about very significant threats to university autonomy.

Specifically, the Bill as drafted would enable the Secretary of State to 'frame guidance' with



reference to particular courses, something which is explicitly precluded at present. S/he would also have new powers to influence the standards used to mark and classify university degrees and, through the Office for Students, the authority to revoke powers given to universities by Act of Parliament or Royal Charter. In a recent article in the Financial Times, Martin Wolf referred to all of this as "a fully-fledged government takeover of the higher education sector". The Parliamentarians and the sector must remain very vigilant through the passage of this Bill.

On Brexit, I have been impressed by the way the sector has reacted, demonstrating a determination to ensure any new arrangements work for us and to seize opportunities as they arise. And in fairness, given the circumstances, the Government has responded reasonably quickly to reassure the science and research community on near-term funding, although we have still to hear a coherent narrative on immigration and the free movement of people, the key issue for universities.

At a more local level, the meetings I held with staff over the summer – around 1,000 people attended – underlined a deep sense of unease, but also an incredible attachment to the University and its values. We owe it to our friends and colleagues from the EU and further afield to do all we can to ensure we maintain a system that enables us to continue to benefit from their loyalty, commitment and expertise.

On a practical level, we will continue to provide updates to staff as we get them, in particular through our digital media and we have been arranging bespoke events such as expert sessions for staff concerned about the immigration implications of the vote.

While there has been understandable concern about the impact of Brexit on research funding, there has been much in recent months to remind us that we have real strength in this area. Examples include a £2.4 million British Heart Foundation award to help transform the treatment of heart disease in people with diabetes, a new Centre for Doctoral Training in collaboration with other universities in the field

of data analytics, in part funded by a £2.2 million Economic and Social Research Council grant and a £3.8 million award to accelerate the development of infection diagnostic tools to stop the unnecessary use of antibiotics.

We have also reached a significant milestone in our evolution as a truly global university, with the first cohort of Chinese engineering students beginning study at our new joint school with South West Jiatong University. And to continue the international theme, we have re-stated our commitment to the sector-wide #WeAreInternational Campaign, which aims to highlight the value of international staff and students, more important than ever at this challenging time.

Looking ahead to the near future, we will launch the University's Cultural Institute next month. The Institute aims to establish us as a pioneer in harnessing the potential of culture to tackle global challenges, while forging stronger links with the cultural community and creating new opportunities to expand the intellectual horizons of our students. The launch will include live performances and site tours, underlining the institute's aim to open up our cultural treasures to a world beyond the campus.

Slightly longer term, but also hugely significant, the University's new £40m innovation and enterprise centre – named 'Nexus' – has just been given the go ahead by the City Council. You can read more about this in the pages that follow, but in essence it will offer a clear point of focus for innovation and collaboration with industry, enabling us to build on our already impressive track record on enterprise and helping boost our billion pound-plus contribution to the local and national economy. It perfectly encapsulates the outward looking, enterprising spirit that has been essential to the University's past successes and will be equally fundamental to our future.

Vice-Chancellor Sir Alan Langlands