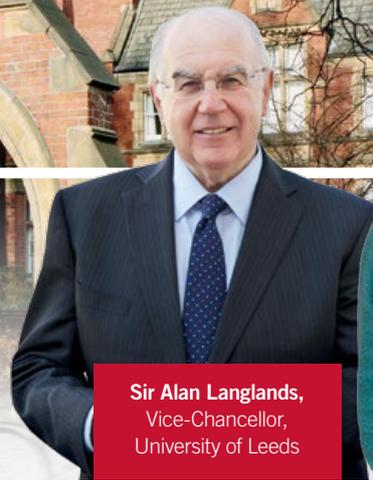


Leader column

Looking to the future – a joint statement from the University and Leeds University Union



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This has been a great year for the University. We have achieved notable success, progress and recognition. Some of the most significant achievements of students and staff and our determination to create a world-class environment for education and research are detailed in a new University publication – the Annual Review 2015-2016*.

This provides an overview of major initiatives including the establishment of our first China-UK joint school; a step-change in digital learning provision; the launch of important new research facilities in structural biology, clinical imaging and robotics. The Priestley International Centre for Climate, the Cultural Institute and the Leeds Institute of Teaching Excellence will also add lustre and academic rigour to the work of the University. Please take time to read the Review and be proud of the depth and breadth of your achievements.

It has also been an exceptional year politically; the result of the EU Referendum, changes in political leadership in the UK and policy changes for higher education and research will result in new challenges and new opportunities. Against this background, it is more important than ever that we continue to foster the strong Partnership that exists between the University and Leeds University Union (LUU). In a departure from the usual Leader Column, this edition is shared with Jack Palmer and Melz Owusu through a joint statement on higher education reform.

“The University of Leeds is proud of ‘The Partnership’ which was developed by students and staff some time ago to describe the mutual expectations of us all as members of the University community.

It is in this spirit that the University and Leeds University Union (LUU) have been considering the Government’s Higher Education and Research Bill, particularly in relation to the new Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and its link to student fees. Our shared position is set out below.

The Government’s reforms aim to give student education parity with research and, putting aside the detail of implementation, this is a principle which both the University and LUU support. Indeed it is a cornerstone of the Leeds approach and is reflected in recent successes, including our National Student Survey (NSS) results and the Times and Sunday Times University of the Year award for 2017.

The University broadly supports the TEF and will use its influence to help ensure that it is implemented carefully and that the methodology is refined in light of experience. Our opposition to the link between the TEF and fee setting is firmly on the record. Nonetheless, the Government appears to be proceeding with this approach.

At Leeds we have tried to implement the recent TEF-linked £250 fee increase as fairly as possible by exempting current and deferring students; a step that LUU agrees was necessary in light of its overall opposition to fees.

More broadly, in recent years we have seen the financial burden for higher education increasingly shift from the taxpayer on to graduates and their families. This represents a reduction in the permanent investment which society makes in future generations. Passage of the Government’s Bill should not be read as setting the pattern of university funding for all time.

We are very conscious of the financial pressures faced by students and we recognise that recent changes – including the ill-advised shift from grants to loans – only serve to make these pressures more acute. We also recognise that the available loans cannot fully cover the cost of study, creating challenges for students from families less able to contribute.

This puts an even greater onus on the University to provide students with the best possible educational experience and the best possible opportunities for personal development and growth. We are committed to preparing genuinely independent, critical thinkers who can make a real and telling contribution to the world around them.

These growing financial pressures also highlight why we must continue to invest in supporting access for students from disadvantaged backgrounds - we will spend nearly £18 million on this in 2016-17 – and why we must do what we can to drive down additional costs. We are taking steps on the latter, such as investing to reduce sports club membership fees, and the University and LUU will work together to explore what more can be done here.

Away from fees and costs, both the University and LUU are concerned that the Bill threatens the autonomy of universities. Specifically we believe that the new regulator, the Office for Students (OfS), should be an arms-length body that can speak truth to power, and not an organisation that slavishly implements the will of Ministers.

We are also concerned about the proposal that the OfS “may assess, or make arrangements for the assessment of...the standards applied to higher education.” It is reasonable that the OfS should have an interest in the process of determining standards but the assessment of standards should be a matter for autonomous universities. We hope that this concern will be tackled during the passage of the Bill in the House of Lords.

Finally, we want to see very careful consideration of the proposal to allow the OfS to award degree awarding powers and university title to institutions and to close under-performing universities. Unless implemented very carefully, this could damage the lives and life chances of students and put the reputation of UK higher education at serious risk.

The University and LUU have a strong record of working together to deliver an excellent student education and experience. This applies to all home and EU students and to international students from about 150 countries around the world and ensures a vibrant, outward looking campus. We therefore ask the Home Secretary to abandon plans to reduce the number of international students coming to study in the UK.

‘The Partnership’ between the University and LUU is sector leading and, although we do not agree with a number of the recent policy and funding changes, we will continue to work closely together to protect students’ access to, and experience of, higher education.’

We also join together to thank ALL students and staff for the part they play in the continued success of the University and we hope that everyone will have an opportunity to relax with friends and family over the holiday period.

*Copies are available to download from www.leeds.ac.uk/forstaff