

Leader column

Tectonic shifts: politics, policies and the University

Every time I write one of these columns it feels like the tectonic plates of politics have shifted to some significant degree since my last offering. And so it is this time.

Most immediately, at the time of writing, we stand on the eve of a snap General Election, in which each of the UK's main political parties has set out their proposals to improve education.

Alongside this, the Higher Education and Research Act received royal assent in Parliament in the final days of the last administration, with the Government providing last-minute concessions which received cross-party support.

What all this external political volatility demonstrates is the need for universities to become ever more agile in order to adapt to change and cope with uncertainty.

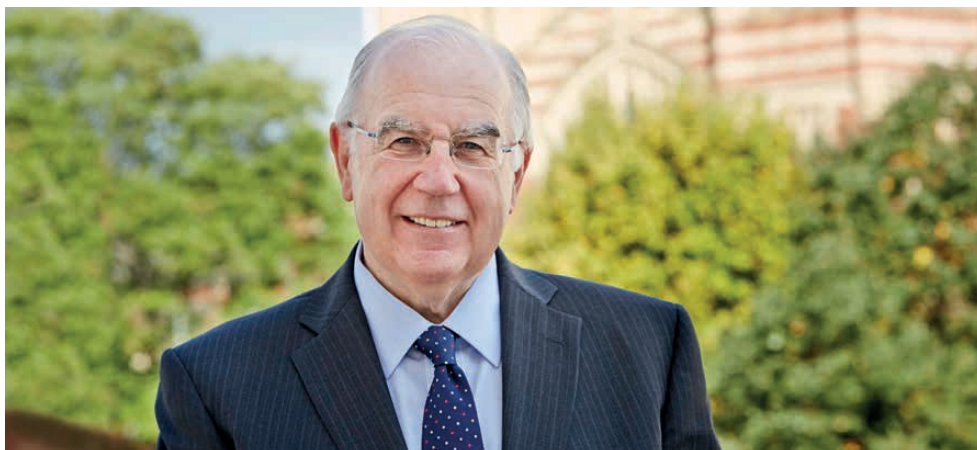
So, starting with the new Act, much of the core detail remains intact, with the establishment of a new regulator, the Office for Students, and the combining of the seven existing research councils into a single body: UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). The explicit requirement for these bodies to work together is a positive move and progress will be assessed year on year.

Many of the points on which the sector lobbied have led to significant improvements in the legislation. There are specific measures to protect university autonomy and academic freedom; there is clear separation of 'quality' and 'standards', with institutions being afforded the freedom to set their own academic standards; and there will be tighter regulation of which institutions can become universities and award degrees. This is all welcome.

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), through which the quality of teaching at universities will be assessed, also remains, although the Government has agreed to an independent review of it. Until that review reports, institutions will be able to increase tuition fees up to the rate of inflation, but there will be no differentiation based on TEF results.

Nonetheless, the Government is continuing with its plan to award universities gold, silver and bronze status, and next week we, along with most of our peers, will know our first TEF result.

Regardless of the outcome – and I have no advance knowledge – Leeds deservedly has an



excellent reputation for the standard of education and experience we provide to our students.

Our commitment to a genuine partnership with the student body and to providing research-based learning that promotes independent, critical thinking has been reflected in everything from our University of the Year award to consistently strong NSS scores.

With my normal health warning about league tables, we can most recently add to these successes fourth place in the Times Higher's Student Experience Survey, alongside further strong progress in the Guardian and Complete University Guide, both of which now place Leeds as the top large 'red brick' university.

And this underlines that the TEF will only be one of many measures by which prospective students choose where to study. We have to help them make that choice, for example, through events like open days, while helping to refine the metrics that underpin TEF.

Turning to the General Election, it is notable that higher education features significantly in the main UK parties' election manifestos, with all the parties' proposals requiring change in the sector.

As heavily covered in the media, the Labour manifesto contains plans to abolish tuition fees and reintroduce maintenance grants.

The Conservative manifesto restates the party's plans for universities to play a larger role in secondary education.

And the Prime Minister has maintained her target of reducing net migration to the 'tens of thousands', while confirming that overseas students will still count towards the statistics. This is alongside proposals for tougher visa requirements for students and a higher bar for those who want to stay and work after graduation. The Russell Group described these proposals as 'worrying', stating that it was likely to have a 'significantly negative impact on the attractiveness of the UK as a study destination'.

It is notable that Labour and the Liberal Democrats have also pledged to guarantee the rights of EU nationals living in the UK.

Whatever the outcome, we are stepping up support for all international staff with a package including a continuation of monthly legal briefing sessions with an external immigration lawyer,

alongside the introduction of free individual consultation meetings and interest-free loans of up to £5,000.

I believe that these measures, along with our new International Strategy set out by Hai-Sui Yu elsewhere in these pages, once again underline the value we place on the expertise, perspective and friendship of our international colleagues.

Finally, there have been many exciting events and developments at the University. Although all very different, they underline what we are ultimately here to do – important to remember in the face of external noise levels.

In April, we opened our £5m Brownlee Centre and cycling circuit, which will provide world class training facilities for staff, students, the public and elite athletes.

Among a host of new and diverse injections of research income have been a £4.5m EPSRC investment in a new Facility for Infrastructure Materials Durability; a share of £5m from Cancer Research UK to improve early cancer detection in GP surgeries; and a new research partnership with Merck, involving a £1m investment in working with our researchers to expand the use of liquid crystals in optical innovations.

And our Healthy Week last month saw strong staff participation in a wide range of activities, while we hosted a second, very successful Be Curious event, inviting our local community into the University to find out more about our research. I hope that this month's Staff Festival will be similarly well attended.

What all this activity demonstrates is that the University is, above all else, a community of colleagues, with not only a shared ambition to create knowledge and opportunity but a strong sense of collegiality, where we treat each other with respect and celebrate diversity.

If we stay true to those principles in the coming weeks and months, I am confident we can handle political and policy change, however complex and unpredictable it might be.

Vice-Chancellor Sir Alan Langlands