

Leader column

Life's contradictions



First and foremost I welcome all new students and staff to a great University which is committed to putting the interests of students front and centre, undertaking research of the very highest quality and making a difference to the world.

On my return from a short holiday in the second week of September, I was immediately struck by the buzz on campus as our new international students settle into life at Leeds. I also started on what will be a year long sequence of visits to every school and professional services group in the University, hearing at first hand about the work of the Digital Education Service - which has already reached 800,000 people around the world and the Centre for Decision Research which is applying the theories and findings of their work in areas as diverse as political science, finance, health, the environment, management and the law. The AGM of the Leeds Institute for Data Analytics which in less than three years has developed a grant portfolio of £45 million and the opening of the groundbreaking Centre for Excellence in Language Teaching were also great highlights on my first week back.

Following our success as University of the Year 2017, The Times and Sunday Times' Good University Guide has placed Leeds in the top 10 institutions in the UK in its overall rankings, our highest ever position in this table. Whilst the usual health warnings apply to league table methodologies, this progress, particularly when set alongside our strong NSS scores and TEF gold rating, confirms that there is clear and consistent external recognition of the excellent quality of the student education we offer and the all round experience we encourage. This is further reinforced by our impressive student recruitment figures for 2017/18 which include a record number of Access to Leeds students, triple A students, and students from the European Union.

At the end of the last academic year, we exceeded our target for new research awards by quite a margin and we are also off to a flying start with new awards for 2017/18. Two significant projects to build resilience in African businesses and communities, led by Professor Tim Benton and Professor Alan Blyth, have recently been awarded a total of nearly £16 million from the Global Challenges Research Fund. You can read more about both projects elsewhere in this edition, but they do show that with the right expertise and planning we can compete successfully for the biggest grant awards – a key priority for Leeds going forward.

There has also been further progress on our investments in infrastructure. Our £96m

integrated campus for engineering and physical sciences - with its focus on advanced functional materials - was given the green light by the Leeds City Council planners during August. This will enable us to combine interdisciplinary working with state-of-the-art facilities to develop research of real global impact and significance; and in turn provide support for existing students and staff, whilst attracting the very best researchers and students from around the world. The Nexus building is also making rapid progress and the redevelopment of the students' union is now complete.

As part of my holiday reading, I came across a fascinating little book about the geometry of the Florence Cathedral Dome by Roberto Corazzi, a Professor in the Department of Architecture at the University of Florence. The book is subtitled 'Originality, proportion and harmony' - traits which could be used to describe some of the upbeat examples set out above or even, in more certain times, the higher education sector as a whole.

Clearly this is not the case at present. On the contrary, this is a time of great political, policy and funding uncertainty, a time when the public and students and staff (present and future) have real concerns about the future of the student funding system, the USS pension scheme and senior staff pay. Overarching concerns about Brexit are also in our minds but, apart from warm words about collaboration on EU research and mixed messages about immigration policy, there is very little to add since I last wrote about this in the Spring. We will continue to update staff about Brexit via ForStaff.

The introduction of higher fees supported by student loans was controversial in the run up to the phased implementation of the new arrangements from 2012 and is now a hot topic again. Underlying this change was a process of substitution, with taxpayers reducing their commitment to higher education very substantially, and students and their families bearing a much higher proportion of the costs. There was some initial marginal gain for successful universities but this is now cancelled out by inflation, higher costs of provision and further cuts in public spending on higher education.

The present system is already complex and, in the absence of any firm commitment to reinstate the public funding that was removed from higher education, the danger is that adjusting it will make it even more complex and lead to unintended consequences. Like taxation - and who can forget Gordon Brown's 10p tax rate and his pensions raid; or George Osborne's disability cuts and his pasty tax - trying to tinker with a complex system

never works! The priority on funding should be to tackle the punitive interest rates on student loans and to reintroduce maintenance grants for those who will find it difficult to cope with living costs at university. The wider policy position can then be thrashed out in an objective way following the next election.

The valuation of the USS pension scheme is currently the subject of consultation. The University will submit its thoughts at the end of September to Universities UK, which will make a coordinated response on behalf of employers. What is clear is that we need a pension scheme that is attractive enough to recruit and retain excellent staff, whilst maintaining financial sustainability and a more stable position for the future. In my view, this must also be achieved by placing the principle of fairness between the generations at the heart of the new arrangements. At a time when those aged over 50 own about four-fifths of the country's wealth, the baby boomers cannot just pull up the drawbridge to the detriment of future generations.

On the vexed question of senior staff pay, I will continue to advocate restraint based on the principles of public service.

This is a pivotal moment in the life of the University and higher education more widely; a time when the opportunities for education and research are so great, and yet the political, policy and funding uncertainties which can influence both are so profound. It is one of life's contradictions that resilience and fragility are to be held in balance at one and the same time. Faced with this challenge, the University Council has agreed that we should continue with our policy of growth and investment but that we should do so with caution, and always be prepared to mitigate policy and financial risks should they arise. The long term academic and financial sustainability of the University remains fundamental to our future and we will keep students and staff fully informed of progress in the coming months as some of the current, external uncertainties are resolved.

2017/18 will be an interesting year and I hope one in which the University can build on its many successes. I therefore finish where I started by welcoming those of you who are new to the University and wishing you a happy, fulfilling and successful time here.

Vice-Chancellor Sir Alan Langlands