SENATE
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VICE-CHANCELLOR’S REMARKS

Four years ago, the cap on student numbers had just been loosened. As others moved quickly to exploit this new freedom, 2012 proved to be a tough year for us in undergraduate numbers. Against that backdrop, I am pleased to be able to begin this address to Senate by reporting a very successful 2016 undergraduate admissions round for the University.

Our undergraduate numbers have grown by around 6%, with the sector overall only growing by 1%. Most disciplines have seen an encouraging rise in numbers, with Schools using the new planning and resourcing arrangements to meet their targets in a variety of ways.

Pressure remains on postgraduate numbers and we need to do more to ensure that the University retains a thriving PGT and PGR community which is another dimension of our sustainability as an institution. Overall though, where we have ended up on recruitment, with the associated financial benefits, feels like a solid result in a volatile environment.
Through the hard work and commitment of colleagues across the University, I hope that we can maintain this momentum for 2017-18. Already, we have seen encouraging attendances at the October Open Days – nearly 10,000 guests in total - and this should, all going well, translate into another strong year for firm applications.

Of course, a growth in student numbers is not confined to the UK. As I saw in my recent trip to China, our programmes at Beijing Institute of Technology (BIT) and Nanjing University Institute of Science and Technology (NUIST) are recruiting strongly. Now, around 4000 Reading students are pursuing degrees and advanced qualifications outside the UK. This demonstrates that such partnerships, alongside our own ‘footprint' in Malaysia and South Africa, are important ways for us to grow without putting intolerable pressure on facilities and services in the UK.

In my talks to staff this term, I will be highlighting the range of external pressures that are impacting on universities generally. These include Brexit, the Stern review of REF, the Higher Education and Research Bill, the Prime Minister having access to universities in her sights and the uncertain funding context. Taken together, it’s an interesting cocktail. More detailed
background notes on each of these issues have now gone up on the Staff Portal and I hope that you will take a look at them.

There is also the TEF where developments about the process are fast-moving. I will now invite Gavin to give Senate a brief update.

While understanding the wider environment is important to put what we are doing into context - very much the focus of my staff talks - it is important for us to remain calm and upbeat. Crucially too, we should remember that we still have significant control over our own destiny.

Our capital programme, with the last part signed off by Council in July, is a good case in point. Already, we are seeing evidence of work starting in the Library, work coming to a conclusion in the Chancellors Building on Chancellors Way, and work completed in the Van Emden lecture theatre.

Inevitably, we will face delays and setbacks which are frustrating for students and staff alike. Witness the listing of the URS building or the local controversies around the redevelopment of St Pat's. However, this is an ambitious programme in its range and scope. In time, we will have
significantly enhanced our campuses here on Whiteknights and at Greenlands.

Another issue under our control is the way in which we fund our activities. I have already mentioned the new system as it affects academic Schools. In addition, we have been able to support a Strategic Initiatives Fund and approved a number of important projects including a further push on postgraduate recruitment, a scheme to enhance our collaborations in Defence, a project to further enhance space utilisation and the expansion of overseas alumni networks.

Stronger student recruitment means that around 30 additional academic appointments can be made this year, over and above like-for-like replacements. Crucially, our overall budget position is healthier and we are confident of achieving a surplus of around £6m, building on last year's likely nearly £4m. To be clear, achieving a surplus is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a means by which we can invest in the future. It also generates confidence on the part of the Council to back our strategy to realise our 2026 vision.

Engagement with RUSU, and students more generally, is another important priority in the year ahead. We will pilot new
forms of dialogue as well as hold debates on important subjects, drawing upon the expertise of those both inside and outside the University.

I would also like to draw your attention to one or two other points as we begin the academic year.

First, we generated over £40m in research income last academic year. This was a very encouraging result in an ever more competitive environment. With our new research infrastructure now embedded, I am quietly confident that we can achieve further success this year.

Second, we retained our position in the top 200 of universities worldwide in the two most significant rankings - QS and THE. Our position in domestic tables has been patchier so we will do what we can to improve our position without sacrificing all the many positive aspects of the Reading experience.

Third, the University through the Department of Fine Art and the efforts of other colleagues was successful in leading a major bid to Arts Council England to fund Reading International, a three-year programme to embed the arts even more in the fabric of the town. I hope that many of you had
the opportunity to attend the stunning first event at Reading Prison.

Fourth, the Museum of English Rural Life reopens next week after a £2m refurbishment. It is a magnificent new facility which will enhance research and teaching, as well as acting as a significant draw to visitors.

Finally, I am sure that Senate would wish to join me in congratulating former student, Alex Gregory who won a gold medal for rowing at the Rio Olympics, emulating similar success in London in 2012.

No words from W.M. Childs today to close my remarks. Given the exhibition at Reading Prison and my reflections on the external environment which I mentioned earlier, perhaps it is appropriate to finish with words from Oscar Wilde who once said:

To expect the unexpected shows a thoroughly modern intellect