At the last meeting of the Senate, Professor Steve Mithen presented his thoughts on the University's emerging research strategy. Since then, of course, we have had the REF results. I think we can safely say that these were encouraging for the University, whilst leaving us more to do if we are to maintain and enhance our position for the next such exercise.

I begin with these comments because it is interesting to speculate what our mood might have been today if the REF outcomes had been considerably poorer for Reading. In the same vein, we might have been doubly despondent if our applications for 2015 entry had not been 20% up, but 10% down.

In saying all of this, I am not complacent at all. The situation facing universities, including this one, remains uncertain. We do not yet know exactly how the revisions to the distribution of QR income will impact on us. The overall fiscal situation for the country is far from clear, except to say that public expenditure is going to be under pressure for many years to come. And despite our application numbers, this is another new year when it comes to the 'rules', with universities able to recruit unlimited numbers of undergraduates.

But having said all of that, the application numbers are very encouraging. To remind you, compared to the same point in 2014, applications are up by 21% (an additional 4,022 applications). The sector as a whole has shown a 2% increase.

Whilst each faculty overall is showing an increase in application volume as compared to last year, subject areas with particularly strong growth include: Film, Theatre and TV, History, English Literature, Law, Economics, Politics and International Relations, Biological Sciences, Pharmacy and Geography.

On the Postgraduate Taught front, compared to the same point in 2014, applications are up by 2%. Particularly encouraging increases can be seen in ICMA, Accounting, and International Business and Management with more modest increases being seen in Food Biosciences, as well as Geography.

On Postgraduate Research, compared to the same point in 2014, applications are down 4% (22 students).
I do not intend to dwell much on REF in these remarks as Steve has taken a number of opportunities around our campuses to explain the results and what actions we are taking in response. I would only say that 'coming out of the blocks fast' is a demonstration of the seriousness of our intent in pushing up our position in 2020 (should that indeed be the date of the next REF).

Incidentally, the 1,911 submissions made by 154 UK universities to the REF have been published on the REF website. The submissions included 52,061 academic staff, 191,150 research outputs (such as journal articles, authored books and book chapters); and 6,975 case studies of the impact of research.

I should remind Senate of the formal review that is being undertaken of the School of Systems Engineering. Full details of the scope of the review have been published on the Staff Portal. I will say no more than that at the present time as Senate may be asked to consider more formal recommendations in due course.

I have a senior staffing matter that I wish to bring to the attention of the Senate. Professor Gavin Brooks’ current period as Pro-Vice-Chancellor comes to an end on 31 July 2015. With the approval of the Appointments Committee, I intend to appoint a Pro-Vice-Chancellor for a period of four years with effect from 1 August 2015.

The Pro-Vice-Chancellor will have the same remit as Professor Brooks has at present; that is, in addition to the other duties of Pro-Vice-Chancellors and members of the University Executive Board, a specific leadership in Teaching and Learning and Student Experience. Professor Brooks is eligible to stand again as he has completed his first rather than second term.

Expressions of interest, which need to be submitted by 24 April 2015 to Dr Messer in his role as University Secretary, will be considered by a Pro-Vice-Chancellor Committee. This will comprise of the President of Council (Chair), a Vice-President of Council, myself, one Dean of a Faculty nominated by the Deans of the Faculties, and the member of the Senate appointed by the Senate to the Council (Professor Walker).

It is the normal expectation that the Pro-Vice-Chancellor Committee will meet with all those who have expressed an interest in appointment or been suggested to it for consideration. It will make a recommendation to the meeting of the Senate in June which will in turn report to the Council and the Council will make the appointment.

I am pleased to draw Senate’s attention to the most recent data regarding our involvement in FutureLearn, the consortium put together to offer Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Last month, FutureLearn enrolled its millionth learner. Across all of the University’s FutureLearn courses, we have 250,826 joiners. Some learners will have joined more than one course but we have made a significant contribution to FutureLearn’s success.

Since we last met there have been a number of national developments that are worth reporting to Senators.
Firstly, funding decisions for 2015-16, the so-called 'HEFCE letter'. This emphasises continuity of policy intent in teaching, research and knowledge exchange, taking account of data changes.

Not surprisingly, the letter is silent on 2016-17 although in a recent address to Universities UK, the HEFCE Chief Executive told vice-chancellors to assume 'flat cash' and advised us to be prudent in our assumptions. As if we would be anything else!

One point to note is that HEFCE have held £35m back for growth in student numbers to be distributed in January 2016. Clearly, this is a 'hedge' against unexpected things happening with the student number controls being lifted.

In terms of research funding in the aftermath of the REF, the budget will be the same as 2014/15 in cash terms. It will also be distributed according to the REF weightings of 65:20:15.

Perhaps of most significance, the 4*:3* ratio will be amended to 4:1 from 3:1 from 2015-16. According to the HEFCE Chief Executive, this approach does not lead to greater concentration of research funding.

In terms of a consultation on QR methodology for 2016-17 onwards, that will follow in due course.

Other highlights reported by HEFCE include, an additional one-off supplement of £24m for the Research Degree Programme and an indication that full consultation will begin soon on PGT loans (following the one-year interim scheme).

Secondly, we were disappointed not to receive any funding under HEFCE’s STEM capital scheme. I should say though that we remain determined to enhance our own facilities as we plan for a new Health and Life Science building.

Thirdly, HEFCE has announced a review of quality assessment arrangements across the sector. This is timely and appropriate.

Fourthly, and playing into that, but not restricted to it, is UUK’s recent report on the future of regulation in HE. Amongst other things, it recommends:

- the establishment of a register of approved HE providers;
- giving the current register greater regulatory status;
- a new Council for Higher Education for England, evolving from HEFCE, that would lead and coordinate sector regulation; and
- proposals for how student protection concerns can be addressed in a risk-based and proportionate way to give students the safeguards they need.

Fifthly, the Review of the National Student Survey. The research, commissioned by HEFCE, did not recommend radical changes to the survey, but suggested some alterations to preserve the strengths of the survey and address identified weaknesses, including new questions on student engagement.
Sixthly, the Counter Terrorism and Security Bill, published in November received Royal Assent on 12 February. Important changes have been made to the face of the Bill, given its first incarnation.

There are also changes likely to be made to the accompanying statutory guidance which allow universities to respond sensitively, sensibly and proportionately to extremism. It will though still cover issues such as risk assessment, requirements for staff training, management and scrutiny of speakers and events, and online safety. Having said all of that, disputes within the Coalition government seem to have resulted in a final version of the guidance now having been postponed until after the election.

Next, STEM accreditation reviews. The announcement of the Government’s science and innovation strategy in December included a commission to establish a general review of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) and a specific review of computer science degree accreditation arrangements. The reviews will explore issues around graduate employability and consider options for how they could be addressed.

Finally, UUK have published a very helpful good practice guide to student mental health in higher education. One of the points it makes is the need for close working with the students' union. I am pleased to say that that is an important feature of what we do here at Reading. Recently, I signed the Time to Change pledge with RUSU as our symbol of our determination to provide the best possible support to all of our students.

We are, of course, now in the run-up (the interminably long run-up, you might think) to the general election. To reassure you (and, I presume, a grateful nation), I will not be following in the footsteps of the first Principal of University College Reading, Halford Mackinder.

Not long after being Director of the London School of Economics, Mackinder was elected to Parliament in January 1910 as Unionist Party member for the Glasgow Camlachie constituency (Unionists in Glasgow....now there's a thought!).

Inevitably perhaps, my own thoughts go back to the same time five years ago when I was in a very different position. Did I predict then where we are now? ‘No’ is the short answer and so, like everyone else in this room, I will be a very interested observer to see what happens between now and Thursday 2 July when we next meet.