SENATE 30 NOVEMBER 2016
VICE-CHANCELLOR’S REMARKS

As only a short time has elapsed since the last meeting of the Senate, I have relatively brief comments to make today. I am also conscious that my colleagues here on the platform will cover some important ground in their remarks.

It is always pleasing to begin with good news and, in that regard, I have four highlights to share with Senate.

Firstly, the University has been part of a Europe-wide consortium that has successfully bid for a Food ‘KIC’, The Knowledge Innovation Committees’ programme that brings together businesses, research centres and universities. I will invite Steve to say a few words about that.

Second, I am very pleased to say that our Institute of Education received a ‘Good’ rating across all areas in the recent Ofsted inspection of initial teacher training - or ITT. In a strong and consistent outcome across all phases, Ofsted has praised the University's ITT Partnership for being 'Good overall in Early Years, Primary and Secondary with some outstanding elements'.

Even more pleasingly, the Institute also heard that it is only one of 25 partnerships in the country to have been awarded three year guaranteed core numbers for PGCE Secondary, PGCE Primary and BA Education from 2017.

The Partnership has also been awarded fully funded Early Years ITT places for 2017-2018. Undoubtedly, this is an acknowledgment of the Institute's quality, particularly for the contribution it makes to teacher training and teacher supply across nine local authorities in the region. What a great way to demonstrate the practical impact our university has in the education field.

And who knows, such experience with Ofsted may stand us in good stead as we take over and run schools if the government has its way....... 

Third, the University's Special Collections and the Museum of English Rural Life recently the Archive Accreditation Award from the National Archives. This is a very powerful endorsement of the quality of what we do in maintaining and operating our archives, both for scholarly and public use.

Fourth, I am sure that Senate would like to congratulate Dr Elizabeth McCrum and Dr David Carter on becoming Principal Fellows of the Higher Education Academy. This is a mark of great esteem and is further evidence of our commitment to raising standards of teaching quality across the University. I am also pleased to congratulate Dr Carter on becoming the new Head of the International Study and Language Institute (ISLI).
Many wider aspects of public policy continue to bear down on universities. This was a point that I made in my recent all-staff talks. Immigration comes to mind immediately and we await - with some trepidation, I am afraid to say - a consultation document from the Home Office. That is now likely next month or at the beginning of 2017.

We know that international students do not feature as a concern for the public, and the over-stay rate is very low. Yet it is hard to see how the government can meet its pledge to bring down immigration numbers without some policy changes regarding international students. Hopefully though, a groundswell of public opinion will persuade the government not to act precipitously and, as a result, damage our country’s interests.

On a much more positive international note, I was in South Africa recently to officiate at two Business School graduation ceremonies. Nearly 300 students received degrees, diplomas or certificates. Currently, around 1000 students are pursuing MBA studies with nearly 2000 others engaged in different kinds of study and/or executive education.

Our work in South Africa is a great example of the University and Business School growing activity overseas. According to the most recent Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) data, around 14% of our students overall are being educated outside the UK. This has got to be a good hedge against forward threats.

Universities UK has produced two important reports in recent weeks. One relates to the task force on violence against women, harassment and hate. Richard Messer is leading a group within the University to ensure that we are in a position to respond to its recommendations by the early part of the spring.

The second report was on social mobility. We are considering that as part of our work on widening participation and the Access Agreement in a group that Gavin Brooks chairs.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s Autumn Statement last week had some encouraging news with the announcement of an additional £2bn for research and development. This appears to represent a substantial real terms increase in government investment. Apparently, the announcement represent ‘first steps’ to the government developing an industrial strategy, on which a green paper will be published before the end of 2016, and a white paper will be published early in 2017.

As part of this new funding, a new Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund (overseen by UK Research and Innovation) will back projects where the UK has a proven scientific strength and there is a significant economic opportunity for commercialisation. Government will consult on how the fund can best support emerging fields such as robotics and artificial intelligence, industrial biotechnology and medical technology, satellites, and advanced materials manufacturing. In addition, a review of current research and development tax incentives will be conducted.

We don’t know much about access to this funding, beyond these headline areas of focus. However, I hope that the University will be in a good position to respond.
Public engagement and participation continues to be an important part of what we do as a University and I am grateful to colleagues across the University for all their efforts in this respect. I am pleased that the University Endowment Fund was able to support a number of such activities in 2016 and we will soon be calling for new proposals for 2017.

It was good that our new School of Architecture held its first - and very well-attended - public lecture, given by Professor John Worthington. That event also saw the unveiling of another of our heritage plaques which celebrated the life and work of the architect Alfred Waterhouse, some of whose buildings are still on the campus.

This term, we have enjoyed lectures given by a number of colleagues which have showcased our research themes, as well as In Conversation events with prominent outsiders.

I would also commend the Careers Service for its programme which brings interesting and stimulating speakers on campus. This term we have had Royal Artillery Major Heather Stanning, perhaps better known as a double Olympic gold medallist in rowing. And, last night, we had an inspiring talk, organised by the Alumni team, given by Reading graduate, Felicity Ashton who is an outstanding polar explorer.

As we enter December, I suspect that national and international events will have made 2016 a year to remember. 2017 also promises to be another dramatic one on mainland Europe and, who knows, elsewhere.

Without too much over-interpretation, I think we can conclude that the rational, empirical, outward-looking, liberal and internationalist consensus which universities have helped to create - and of which they are a part - has been put under severe strain. So I conclude, not with a quote from the past but with hope for the future.

As we continue to face great national and global challenges, curiosity-driven research still has the capacity to be epoch-changing, in the same way that the best advanced education we can provide to our students can be life-changing. So let us end the year on an optimistic note as we must not lose heart or retreat. Our voices, and our work, has never been more important.