SENATE 29 JUNE 2017
VICE-CHANCELLOR’S REMARKS

When Senators dispersed at the end of the last meeting in March, none of us could have anticipated that our next gathering would be held in the aftermath of a general election. Against the opinion poll predictions, the outcome was a surprise but, of course, we await to see what the implications will be for higher education.

It is likely though that the funding environment could become less predictable. In that context, inevitably, the Brexit negotiations will be crucial. At least there is some continuity when it comes to the Universities Minister.

Of course, to repeat a point I have made on a number of occasions, universities retain a very high degree of organisational autonomy and agency. So while we will watch with interest how the national picture develops, there is much that we continue to do to shape and control our own destiny.

My remarks today will be very brief because there have been a number of substantial items on the agenda today which, properly, are the focus of our attention. So I have only four brief areas to cover.

First, TEF and the institution’s award of a ‘Silver’ rating. I am sure Senate will be very pleased with this outcome which is a strong first showing. Crucially, it acknowledges that we deliver high quality teaching and learning coupled with excellent outcomes for our students. It also shows that we consistently exceed the rigorous national quality requirements for UK higher education.

Equally, it provides a platform for us to move upwards in the future. I am very grateful, of course, to everyone across the University who has played a part in this achievement and, in particular, those colleagues who were central to the preparation of our submission. Gavin may want to say more about this in a few moments, as well as comment on the next steps on TEF, including the government’s proposed independent review.

Second, capital expenditure priorities for the University. Senate will be aware that we are in the midst of a major capital programme. Not everything has gone to plan – one only needs to say the letters ‘URS’ to know what I mean – so we are reviewing where we are and what our options might be for the medium to long term. As always, many future schemes compete for our attention as we balance up teaching, research, student experience and investment demands. So, in due course, the University Council will need to provide its steer as we work up the scope and scale of the programme ahead. This will be a matter we return to in the future.

Third, following an announcement in the 2016 budget, the government confirmed in the spring that doctoral loans of up to £25,000 will be available for courses up to eight years in time for the 2018-19 academic year. With an upper age limit of 59, these loans will be available for all level 8 doctoral programmes of research. Clearly, we will have to wait and see what impact this has on numbers but it is, potentially, an encouraging development.
Fourth, Graduate Outcomes, the new name for the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey. Following an extensive consultation exercise on the subject, new arrangements will be introduced in the autumn of 2018 as graduates from 2017-18 are surveyed.

Key differences in this new survey include graduates being surveyed 15 months after completing their studies, four survey points in the year and – very importantly – the administration of the survey being done by a single central survey contractor. In addition, there will be an opportunity for HE providers to ask additional optional questions as part of the survey. All of these changes should be broadly welcomed.

Fifth, implementing the Higher Education and Research Act 2017. As Senators will know, the government rushed this over the line ahead of Parliament being dissolved. Not unsurprisingly, there are important questions about how the reforms will work. We have new bodies in the Office for Students and the UK Research and Innovation. In the case of OfS, it will inevitably need to balance its ‘market regulator’ role, not least in support of students, with its overarching concern about the sector and its health. Another important dimension here is to ensure that the sector retains ownership of the definition of academic standards but in a way that continues to secure public confidence.

On the research front, we will be watching carefully as the new arrangements for UKRI bed down. During the passage of the Act, concerns were raised concerning how the £6 billion annual funding granted to UKRI by the Secretary of State would be allocated between the seven research councils, Innovate UK and Research England. It is a positive development though that the Act now has an explicit requirement that the government must publish details of the funding provided to UKRI, as well as its terms and conditions. Good too that that dual support will be protected.

As I mentioned at a previous Senate, for the first time, the Act also places the Haldane principle in primary legislation with respect to funding provided to UKRI. The principle is defined in Section 103 (3): ‘that decisions on individual research proposals are best taken following an evaluation of the quality and likely impact of the proposals (such as a peer review process).’ I think this is very significant and will contribute to the long term strength of UK higher education.

Finally, and in the light of today’s earlier discussion, I thought that Senate might be amused to know that its constitution and operation occasioned comment from at least one of my distinguished predecessors. I wonder if today’s discussions might have benefited at all from Sir John Wolfenden’s comments on Senate:

We were thirty-odd, arranged round a hollow square of tables, so that there could be assertion and counter-assertion (We also had the civilised habit of meeting at five o’clock, so that for obvious reasons no Senate could last for more than two hours)....

There was plenty of cut and thrust, but it was all conducted with decorum – gowns and no-smoking – and a degree of formality which did not inhibit plan speaking.

I shall leave Senators to decide which parts, if any, of 1950s Senate they would seek to emulate.