University strategy

1. My appointment as the new Vice-Chancellor was made by a special meeting of the University Council on the 21 February, and publicly announced on the 26 February 2019. I consider the appointment a great honour and I will exercise my role with energy and commitment, while retaining the openness and transparency I have advocated during my period as Acting Vice-Chancellor.

2. The Council has asked me, as a key priority, to progress and conclude the new University strategy at the earliest opportunity. It also asked me to be radical in the way the University positions itself in an increasingly challenging environment. Evidently, this requires colleagues, students and external stakeholders to play a part in the discussions that will lead to our new Strategy.

3. Since last summer, in light of the recruitment and other challenges, UEB has been reflecting on our current strategy and started to develop the underlining principles for a new strategy. The emerging ideas were shared with Council for discussion and input in November, and with colleagues in both the all-staff termly talks in the autumn and in my 29 talks to all the Schools and Functions this term, which are now complete.

4. One of the key principles on which we all agree, is to focus more strongly on the quality of our teaching and learning and research. Quality means ensuring we provide an excellent academic and wider student experience by listening to the feedback students have provided and acting on it, by being innovative in the way we work, and how we prepare our students for the world of work. We need to take steps now to ensure that we can meet the needs and preferences of our current and prospective students so that, when numbers of university-age students rise significantly from 2022, we are in a stronger position to compete. Quality also means that Schools and disciplines must continue to deliver the highest-quality research and the best possible REF returns.

5. At a time where the funding for Universities will continue to be challenged, this is likely to mean the way we use time and money for delivering our activities may need to be redistributed, to support the very best and promising researchers and to ensure that the student experience is improved.

6. Over the coming months, I will lead the development of a new mission, values and aspirations which will be developed in conjunction with our colleagues, students and our external stakeholders.
Voluntary Redundancy

7. Our undergraduate applications are significantly down from both UK/EU and overseas prospects compared to the same time last year. Across the sector undergraduate applications are down by a small percentage as are our closest six competitors. Some of our decline will be down to the demographic dip, but we consider our relatively poor league table ranking, attributable to our recent National Student Survey results, as the main reason for this decline in applications. Quite simply, we are facing an increasingly challenging recruitment situation and financial position as a result.

8. This has created a financial shortfall against our five-year plan. The voluntary redundancy scheme will play an important role in returning Schools and Functions to positions of financial sustainability, and the scheme is designed to minimise the need for compulsory redundancies wherever possible. We cannot rule out compulsory redundancies. Failure to act now will only lead to worse problems in the near future.

NIRD and Reading University UCU Vote of no confidence

9. Colleagues will have seen press coverage reviewing the detail of the land belonging to the National Institute for Research in Dairying trust and the University’s finances more generally. I recognise the potential reputational damage that this can have for the university and I have responded quickly and openly to the issues raised.

10. As soon as I became aware of the governance issues with the NIRD trust, I took action, raising the issue with both the Charity Commission and the Office for Students. I also worked with the president of Council to ensure that the appropriate governance arrangements were put in place. Critically, it is important to note that this governance matter has no wider implications for the university group’s ongoing financial position. The university responded the very same day to the guidance article (read our response position here).

11. It is important to me that I have an open and constructive relationship with Reading University UCU, so when they wrote to me in response to the press coverage I responded to their concerns. You can read the letter here (you will need to enter your university staff number and password). I also took the opportunity to attend their emergency meeting on 13 February to discuss this in person and in detail. Although they did not raise it with me in the meeting, UCU then passed a pre-prepared notion of no confidence after the meeting to which I responded and invited the UCU Chair to a meeting to discuss the detail of the concerns raised.

12. It is also important to note that, in light of the recent coverage, I wrote an opinion piece in the Times Higher – you can view a version of this here on the staff portal.

Community Relations and the Community Forum

13. I believe it is very important for the University to work with others and fulfil its mission as a Civic University. In the autumn, my office started to document more formally the scope and nature of our partnerships and we are starting to share this information with key stakeholders internally and externally, to identify what more we can do and how. At the University Court in March, we will launch our
Economic Impact report and give external stakeholders the opportunity to hear about some of our partnerships with our local community.

14. Community concerns about higher levels of complaints regarding poor student behaviour continue, causing reputational damage amongst our immediate neighbours and our local politicians. Unsurprisingly, poor student behaviour dominated the concerns raised at the second Community Forum last month (where I shared a panel with the Police, RUSU officers and the Deputy Leader of Reading Borough Council).

15. In response, I went out one night with the Street Support team to see first-hand how they support our students and addresses concerns. The Street Support pilot will be evaluated carefully. Building stronger relationships with local politicians is very important, I have already met with one of our local MPs, Matt Rodda and the Chief Executive of Reading buses. I also plan to meet local councillors in both Reading and Wokingham very shortly to discuss areas of opportunity and listen to concerns.

PROFESSOR ROBERT VAN DE NOORT, Vice-Chancellor, March 2019