Honorary Fellows Address 2014

Honorary Fellows, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to welcome you to this year's Honorary Fellows dinner and to update you briefly on some of the highlights of the past year.

But first, let me add my congratulations to our new Honorary Fellows and welcome them into this special group of people who, along with our Honorary Graduates, have been recognised not only for their achievements, but for their continued commitment and support of the College.

To you all, welcome and thank you.

In each of my three previous addresses at this dinner, I have remarked on the changing landscape of UK higher education and the impact of new government policy on our funding and ability to recruit students.

During that time, we have seen the virtual removal of all direct funding for English universities, with the cost of higher education transferred to students through higher tuition fees and loans supported by the tax payer.

Recently, I have reported on the partial lifting of the cap on the number of Home and EU students we can recruit – at least those with higher A level grades.

And whilst we have been free to recruit as many international students as we wish, the over-reporting of the UK government’s attitude to net migration has had the effect of deterring some overseas students from studying in the UK – an odd position for the UK’s 10th largest export industry to find itself in.

As the current coalition government enters its final year, with a General Election in 2015, one might think that we had reached the end of policy change.

However, in a surprise announcement in December 2013, the English universities minister, David Willetts, who incidentally has been a good supporter of the sector,
announced the complete removal of the Home and EU student number recruitment cap from 2015.

Whilst yet another change, this news is very welcome, as it genuinely allows both students and universities freedom of choice – for students, freedom of choice as to where to apply and for universities, freedom of choice about the number of students to accept.

Whilst none of us can expect a smooth ride at the hands of unconstrained market forces, I am convinced that this move creates a fairer playing field for all and avoids the bizarre situation where we can admit one student, but not another, because their academic performance is separated by what may be just a fraction of a percentage point in their respective A-level grades.

Further change will also occur from this summer when the government’s plans to toughen up GCSEs and A-levels starts to bite.

The removal of January A-level exams and a reduction in the ability to re-sit modules is almost certainly going to reduce the number of higher grades achieved with consequent impact on recruitment.

Later reforms will see more significant changes to the way in which high school students learn and are assessed, meaning we will have to carefully rethink the process of transition from school to university, to ensure that all our undergraduate students succeed in their studies with us.

With so much change to manage, it has been important for the College to know where it wants to go and how it’s going to get there.

For this reason, 18 months ago we commissioned work to revise our strategic plan; something I mentioned in last year’s address.

Whilst such plans do not fully describe a route, or even a destination, they are useful in setting out broad objectives, values and criteria against which we can assess opportunities and threats.
After extensive consultation and dialogue, last year Council, our governing body, adopted a new plan that sets our direction for the future and will allow us to respond to the many policy and funding changes we have already experienced, as well as those that lie ahead.

The plan seeks to maintain and take advantage of the unique nature of Royal Holloway:

- high academic excellence, in both our staff and students,
- a single primary campus,
- a broad disciplinary coverage and
- a student population that allows staff and students to form a genuine community.

The plan has been supplemented by an estate masterplan that sets out the development of the physical estate to support our strategy.

Essential to all these plans is the need to successfully compete in the new, deregulated student market and much of our recent effort has been directed towards raising the profile of Royal Holloway with schools and colleges, in the press and media, and in the local community.

Our new branding and visual identity was launched last year and is being progressively rolled-out to ensure that we have visibility that conveys both our heritage and our optimistic outlook.

We have paid particular attention to how we are perceived by schools and colleges, through our publications, open days and applicant visit days.

It is pleasing that the hard work by our staff and supporters is starting to pay off with more than a 10% increase in undergraduate applications for 2014 entry and an increase of 10% in those applicants making us their first choice university.

This recruitment success, along with the lifting of the student number cap, has given us the ability to start to strengthen our academic portfolio and fill some of the strategic gaps in our offering.
We have started with the opening of a new School of Law which will admit its first students in 2015.

This is an initiative that has long been discussed and indeed many of our former students have entered into the law profession.

The initiative was launched at a dinner in the Old Bailey, hosted by the Sheriff of London, himself a lawyer and former Royal Holloway student.

We are also working on plans to take our first steps into engineering with taught programmes in software engineering, electronic engineering and engineering physics.

In our existing departments, there are a range of initiatives to refocus our programmes and introduce new combinations of programmes including Liberal Arts that will allow students to take a mix of subjects across the arts, humanities and science.

The result of these initiatives will see our total student population rise to just over 10,000 – representing a modest level of growth that secures our finances, whilst retaining the community spirit that cannot be found in much larger, sprawling and impersonal campuses found in our major cities.

Outside schools and colleges we have been working hard to raise our profile, with press coverage doubling for two successive years and the staging of a number of high profile events and activities that firmly places us on the map.

Science has been a strong theme in our outreach with the ever popular Science Festival attracting record numbers of visitors – this year just over 6,000 – along with our co-hosting of BBC’s Stargazing Live! event in early January.

Our arts and humanities have also had significant profile, not least with the award of a Regius Chair in Music, which I reported on at our last dinner.
Royal Holloway was the only university to receive a Regius Chair in the arts and humanities, the remaining 11 awards all going to science and engineering, and we have the only Regius Chair in Music in the country.

Whilst there was no official conferment ceremony, it was particularly pleasing that Her Majesty chose to visit Royal Holloway in March to celebrate our musical success.

During the visit, Her Majesty was pleased to learn that our Chapel Choir, who she heard sing, would be performing at the Royal British Legion’s Festival of Remembrance in November this year, which you will know is also broadcast on BBC1 and holds a special place in the affections of Her Majesty.

Whilst much of our activity and thinking is oriented towards the national and international scene, we are very mindful that we are located in a community and we continue to pay special attention to relationships with that community.

It is for these reasons that our estate masterplan is such an important document as we reach agreement with Runnymede Borough Council on how we will develop the campus in the future and how those plans can be support the Council’s own ambition for Egham and Englefield Green.

Whatever our plans, Nature has a habit of reminding us from time to time who is in charge, and earlier this year we saw devasting floods in the local area, as well as farther afield.

I am delighted that the College was able to play its role in helping households and organisations who were hit by the floods.

At an individual level, many of our staff contributed to relief efforts in and around Egham, some of whom themselves were personally affected.

Our student body, and especially the American football team, undertook sterling work in filling and delivering sandbags and offering help around the town.
The College itself, became host to the children of Thorpe Lea primary school, as they temporarily decamped into one of our buildings whilst their own premises were made good.

Volunteering, being a good neighbour, shared use of resources and the wide cultural programme that is open to members of the local community, are ways in which this College contributes to the social and welfare of the local area.

However, the College, as a business with a turnover now exceeding £140m also has a significant economic impact, confirmed by a recent independent assessment of our contribution to the local economy.

In 2012-13, Royal Holloway added to the value of the UK economy by some £482m, supporting some 7,290 jobs, a very significant proportion of which accrues to the County of Surrey and Borough of Runnymede.

The majority of the added value comes from our core activities of employing staff, procuring goods and services, and supporting business at around £180m gross value added and 3,800 jobs.

A further £3m of value and 163 jobs arise from tourism activities.

Whilst our 9,000 students add £113m to our local economy and support over 3,300 jobs.

I know, from the occasional letters I receive, that living close to a student population has its down sides and our community liaison team do their very best to minimise problems.

But from these figures I hope that it is self-evident that our student body adds huge economic value to our community, as well as enhancing it through its social and cultural contribution.
Achieving such success does not come easy and is only made possible by excellent, talented and committed staff, right across our staff base: senior managers, academics, professional service staff and the many others that play key support roles.

Although based in an area of near full-employment and relatively high housing cost, we are lucky to attract the quality of staff we need.

We also have an excellent governing body comprising primarily of independent, external members who freely give their time and offer value advice and guidance, as well as ensuring the College remains focused and delivers to its many stakeholders.

Together with our excellent students, our staff and governors continue to ensure that Royal Holloway ranks amongst the best universities in the world:

- Number 102 in the world rankings (out of some 6,000 institutions)
- 12th in the UK (out of nearly 150 institutions)
- 36th in Europe and,
- 4th in the world and 1st in the UK for the most international outlook.

Whilst attracting good staff and students is less of a problem, our physical estate is a problem – not so much the fabulous Founders building with its student rooms, pantries and bathrooms now fully refurbished – but rather in the sheer quantity of floor space we have.

Our physical resources are used to maximum capacity and, as I am sure you will appreciate, cannot easily be expanded.

Therefore we have had to use our imagination and creativity to make the very best of what we have.

For example, over the past 24 months we have:

- created a multi-purpose 250-seat lecture theatre and performance space in our old boiler house
• refurbished most of our seminar rooms and
• removed staff offices from our library to create over 100 additional study spaces.

These initiatives sit alongside longer-term projects such as the wonderful new Drama Studio and refurbished departmental accommodation now named in honour of the founder of drama at Royal Holloway, Katharine Worth.

The most significant developments, however, are still to come, first with the opening of a new Library in 2017.

Plans are well underway for the development of a new library and student services building at the heart of the campus, complementing the Founders and Windsor Buildings and creating a wonderful public space between all three.

In addition to a library, the building will house our student service centre, careers service, café and other student and staff amenities, as well as a purpose built art store and additional exhibition space.

Much of the preliminary work and site surveying has been completed and we expect to submit our planning application soon.

We are working hard to ensure that students joining us this September will be able to benefit from the new Library in the revision period for their final exams three years later.

In the meantime, they will be able to benefit from new sports facilities, including a refurbished gym and 3rd generation all-weather sports pitches, supporting by a very generous bequest from a former student.

When completed, the new library will liberate space in the current Bedford Library which will then be converted into new academic accommodation to house some of our growing departments and provide additional space for others.

In the coming years, we expect also to complete the Boiler House development with addition of a courtyard café; we are planning a new building to house music and media
and we expect to bid for some of the very limited HEFCE capital funding to support more space for our science departments.

From this brief survey of activities and developments, I hope you can appreciate the vibrant and dynamic atmosphere in which we operate.

Such an environment is of course essential to the creativity and inventiveness that lies at the heart of being a university and what attracts our students and staff.

With our new strategic plan, the development of the estate, good community relations and, of course, the support of our Honorary Fellows, I am confident that we will continue to go from strength to strength, and I look forward to reporting more success stories when we meet again, next year.

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your attention and please now enjoy your dinner.