

FRONTIER'S Conversation with the Vice-Chancellor

In October 2014, the University of Leicester gained a new Vice-Chancellor: Professor Paul Boyle. In an interview with Frontier's **Felicity Easton**, the Vice-Chancellor discusses what makes the University of Leicester unique and how we can all do our part to put Leicester on the map.

As you've been in office here for over a year, what is your main focus for developing the research community at the University of Leicester?

Before I started as Vice-Chancellor, I heard about some of the impressive research going on at the University of Leicester; the institution has a global reputation in some areas so you can't miss it! Having been here for over a year now and having met a lot of people across the various departments, my positive opinion of the research at the University has only grown.

We are a highly research-intensive university; therefore, my main focus is increasing our excellence in research. In line with this aim, we are launching four new research institutes. The institutes accommodate four areas of research: precision medicine, structural biology and chemistry, creative economics, and space and earth observation. These are not just areas of research that we are involved in, but areas in which we are world-leading. These new institutes are also designed to be very interdisciplinary, so critically we want to make sure people across different disciplines get together more often to talk about their work.

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We also want academics and research students to be bolder, more confident about the work that they are doing. Really get out there and engage with funding agencies, speak to other universities and collaborators and make your work as international in perspective as you can.

In addition to your career in academic research, you have held many leading roles on research councils and advisory bodies worldwide. What personally inspired you to go down this path, and is there anything you miss about research?

I came into this career as an academic, and I loved my career. I'll be honest - I could never have imagined giving up being an academic; it was just a joy to be able to wake up in the morning with an idea and go into the office and study it. But gradually the group of people I was managing grew, so a lot of the work became more about management than research *per se*.

When the opportunity at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) arose, I couldn't turn it down. There is only one ESRC job out there in the UK. It was a privilege to be offered this fantastic chance to make real impact and the idea that I could help improve the way Social Science is managed in the UK was a real driving force behind my decision. After running the ESRC with a fairly big budget and having experience in large international bodies such as Science Europe, you start to enjoy the imagination that is needed to deliver change and improvement at the top of these organisations.

How do you feel your scientific background influences how you make decisions in the organisations?

I think there are a number of answers to that. One of the things that academia teaches you is to be evidence-based; that you really want to try and rely on evidence to make your judgments. It teaches you to question, to not necessarily accept the anecdotes and urban myths that float around. Research teaches you how to be imaginative, how to generate good ideas, and to innovate. I think you develop these practical skills as an academic, and that is probably true regardless of what discipline you come from.



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Can you shed light on how you hope to leave a lasting impact on the University of Leicester during your time as Vice-Chancellor?

I hope to help transform it. Leicester has a fantastic world-class reputation, but we can always be better. We need to think about how we can change the way we work. Firstly, we need to generate new partnerships and work with more organisations, be it other universities, local businesses, the city council, larger enterprises, etc. Secondly, I would like us to strive for a cultural change. We want to make sure that people here are really proud of the University of Leicester as it is such a fantastic institution. I think many people are aware, but Leicester as a university, and indeed Leicester as a city, can do more to promote itself, shouting from the rooftops about the fantastic things we are doing. Thankfully, topical events such as Leicester City Football Club's recent success and the discovery of King Richard III have drawn a lot of attention to us. I think developments like these are really putting Leicester on the map.

There are also practical ways to leave an impact. I hope we are going to come up with some ambitious plans to transform the campus; although there are some really wonderful buildings, there are also areas that we can improve. We hope to create the National Space Park, by the National Space Centre on the other side of town. If the development comes off, it will be a second campus for the University, a really big development done in partnership with the city, local businesses, and major international space and earth observation businesses. So there are quite a lot of big schemes we have planned for the next few years.

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How do you expect international collaborations will help our research output?

There are all sorts of ways that international collaborations can transform our research output. We know from citation analyses, for example, that academic papers involving international collaborators are cited far more than papers lacking them. Part of the reason for this is because people don't collaborate internationally unless it is worthwhile, making your work appear more attractive as a result. So, I would like to see us thinking about how those international partnerships should develop; how we build really deep relationships with other universities, not only at the institutional level, but also at the level of individual academics.

Leicester is famous for its ethnically diverse population. Can you explain the importance of this to the University of Leicester?

I am extremely proud of the multi-cultural nature of the University and the city. Around a third of our campus students come from outside the EU, so we are a very diverse community and that is fantastic. It really does shape the look, the feel, and the way we do things at this institution. We are very keen to promote diversity and think about the ways that different groups come together. We are part of this unusual community; we are

one of the few cities in the UK without a majority White British demographic. So that's a real opportunity for us here at Leicester that not all universities have.

In addition to cultural diversity, how do you think we can continue to improve gender equality at the University of Leicester, especially in research?

I think it is a really critical issue. A gender pay gap exists at our university and at every other university in the UK at the moment. One of the things we have already done is to commission an external review of our gender pay differences, to examine how we have arrived at them and assess whether they are unfair or not. Of course it is true that men earn more than women; this may be partly explained by the fact the types of jobs that men and women are doing here overall. You also have to look at the balance of men and women across different academic disciplines. If, after taking these sorts of factors into account we still find that there is a gender pay gap, then we will have to think hard about how to resolve it.

“HeForShe is about getting men to take more responsibility in addressing some of the gender inequality that we see”

I'm happy to say that we are playing a leading role in the United Nations HeForShe movement which aims to recruit more men to advocate for gender equality. HeForShe has what they call a '10 × 10 × 10' approach: ten businesses (including Barclays, Vodafone and Twitter), ten national leaders (including the Prime Ministers of Japan, Iceland and Sweden), and ten universities (including Leicester) around the world who are championing this movement. HeForShe is about getting men to take more responsibility in addressing some of the gender inequality that we see. I think this is vital; of course we want women to campaign around this issue, but we also need men to realise that it's a serious issue too.

We've already done a lot of work by putting more women on our top committees and making sure there is a reasonable gender balance, and we are encouraging every committee to think carefully about the gender issues that we know are important for us to take into account.

If I am honest though, I think an even bigger issue for universities is ethnic diversity. Sadly, despite the fact that we have a hugely multicultural city and student population, we still have far fewer people from minority ethnic groups working at the University than we really should have. There are many issues around diversity more generally, both gender and ethnic, which I think we have to consider.

Do you have any closing remarks for our readers?

I spent a little bit of time recently working with Universities UK on the whole issue of Brexit and whether the UK should withdraw from Europe. I have spent a lot of time in Europe; I was president for Science Europe in Brussels and I spent a lot of time engaging with the European Commissioner, for instance. There is no question that some things could be done better in the EU, just like any administration, but from the University's point of view I genuinely believe we are better off being part of a European community. While I wouldn't want to influence how your readers vote, I would want to encourage them to vote. It's really important that they make their voices heard.