

The University of Surrey's vision is to become a world-class university by the year 2020. *Surrey Matters* talked to the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Patrick Dowling, about what is needed to achieve that ambition.

Becoming WORLD-CLASS

SM: Vice-Chancellor, how would you define a 'world-class' university?

V-C: There are many different criteria you could apply, but I think most people would agree that a truly world-class university needs to have a high international profile and a reputation for exceptional scholarship, both in research and teaching.

In addition, it must offer high quality facilities, both for staff and students, and the ability to provide an excellent campus experience. I think academic freedom is also essential, along with an atmosphere of real intellectual excitement. It needs the right structures for effective governance, and solid financial foundations to enable it to plan effectively for the future.

Finally, it must have the ability to make a positive contribution far beyond its immediate region and environment.

But the most important factor is people. World-class universities are able to attract and retain the best and brightest students and staff from right around the world.

SM: How does the University of Surrey compare against those criteria?

V-C: Very well in some parts, but we have some way to go in others. We are already recognised as one of the UK's leading research universities, and this was reflected in the last Research Assessment Exercise in 2001, which rated around 60 percent of our research staff as world-class in their field. We were ranked fifth in the UK based on the percentage of staff working in 5* internationally rated research areas, beaten only by Imperial College, Cambridge, Oxford and the London School of Economics. That's a great achievement, and we have programmes in place to improve on it for the next RAE in 2008.

We also have an excellent reputation for the practical relevance of our research. We have real strength in the areas of health, the environment, social policy and other important quality-of-life issues, as well as in the technologies of the future, particularly post-genomic research, nanotechnology, mobile communications, materials science and small satellite technology.

Over the years, we have also established an excellent reputation for building productive relationships with industry and commerce, and for applying our research strength in innovative ways to create successful spin-out enterprises. One of our most successful companies, Surrey Satellite Technology Limited, has just attracted a major inward investment from US-based commercial rocket company SpaceX.

So I think we have a very good foundation on which to build, but obviously we have more work to do, particularly to ensure that we deliver our teaching to the highest possible standards and provide a top quality student experience. For this reason, I am delighted that we have just been awarded one of the Higher Education Council for England's first Centres of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL), which is evidence that we are making excellent progress with these priorities. And the development of Manor Park, which is now well under way (see 8-9), will create a genuinely world-class campus setting for our students and staff.

SM: What changes do you expect to see for universities in the future?

V-C: There is no doubt that UK universities are already in the throes of major change. Competition between them is on the rise, and likely to intensify even further when variable fees are introduced in 2006/07. Increasingly, the choices made by students

on where and what to study are being based on hard economic decisions.

In future, universities will only remain competitive if they succeed in fulfilling the rising expectations of students, who quite rightly see themselves as 'customers' with the ability to pick and choose. It's essential for Surrey to remain committed to continuous improvement, so that students see us as a sound investment for their future.

At the same time, we believe that anybody with the ability to benefit from higher education should have the right to do so, regardless of their social background or personal circumstances. Money should not be a barrier to developing talent and potential. To address this, we have developed an attractive portfolio of bursaries and scholarships to reward academic excellence and to provide financial support to those who need it.

SM: What changes do you see in higher education internationally?

V-C: International recruitment is a very important issue for us. We currently attract students and staff from 140 countries around the world, and this creates a rich multicultural diversity on campus of which we are very proud. It also provides us with an important income stream to underpin our academic mission.

But competition worldwide is also increasing, and every year we see more countries and institutions prepared to compete head-on with the UK for overseas students. Higher education is increasingly becoming a globalised marketplace.

UK universities are still highly regarded around the world, but we must not take for granted that there will be an endless supply of overseas students wanting to study here. We must explore new ways of catering for overseas demand, including distance learning and the possibility of establishing an overseas presence.

SM: What do you think the priorities are for the University of Surrey over the next few years?

V-C: I think our commitment to continuous improvement, both academic and in terms of the wider student experience, needs to remain at the top of the agenda. We need to ensure that the University of Surrey becomes synonymous with a high quality, rewarding and enjoyable educational experience.

Our expansion onto Manor Park will be a key element in this. It is our most significant development since the University was established in Guildford nearly forty years ago. It will create a genuinely world-class academic campus for students and staff, with state-of-the-art buildings for research and teaching, and first-class sports facilities.



The Vice-Chancellor,
Professor Patrick Dowling.

SM: What do you think the University's particular strengths are as it moves forward?

V-C: First and foremost its people. Developments like Manor Park are very important, but it is our staff and students that will make us a world-class university. It is essential that we are able to attract and retain the best staff and students from around the world.

Good leadership is also vital. I think we are fortunate to have a highly talented and professional team leading our management functions in the Schools and departments, and in the central administrative areas.

In appointing Professor Christopher Snowden as my successor as Vice-Chancellor, I think the University has made an excellent choice. Professor Snowden has the vision and experience to build on the successes of the past and to take the University forward even further. I look forward to working with him over the coming months to ensure a smooth transition.

Finally, I think the University of Surrey has the right structures in place to ensure that it remains financially and managerially robust into the future. Our decisions in past years to diversify our income streams and reduce our dependency on the public purse have given us a strong platform for future growth and success. We will remain a highly entrepreneurial university, and will continue to build productive links with business and industry.

To conclude, although there is still a lot of work to be done, the University of Surrey can already demonstrate world-class performance in many areas. I have every confidence that it will successfully build on this and achieve its goal of becoming a world-class university by 2020.