

Vice-Chancellor, Professor Paul Curran's speech at The Chancellor's Dinner, Mansion House, 22nd April 2015

Chancellor, Pro-Chancellor, My Lords, Aldermen, Sheriffs, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour and privilege to be leading our great University through a period of unprecedented change in both our performance and our partnerships. I am pleased to say that one thing which hasn't changed is our purpose. What City does day in, day out, year in and year out is to transform the lives of around 20,000 students, create new knowledge and use our expertise to support business and the professions.

I started my first speech at this event some four years ago by talking about our early history. We started life in Victorian times as a venture supported by Livery Companies, with core funding based on a mix of philanthropy and a tax on strong drink. The aim was to combine public improvement and advanced education using a model that had been pioneered by our neighbour; Queen Mary. An educational charity and board were established in 1891 to guide this early development along with the development of similar institutions in the vicinity, most notably, Birkbeck.

I noted that in a little over a century and from a single London Square, City is now positioned among the top five percent of universities in the world; that we aspired to be the only university in London to be both committed to academic excellence and focused on business and the professions and that we needed to prepare ourselves for the regulatory, financial and competitive storm that was coming our way.

At that time, the need for us to change, the urgency of that change and fortunately, the direction of that change were very evident. We therefore defined where we were, in terms of quantitative indicators, decided exactly where we wanted to be in similar terms and swiftly implemented a Plan to take us there.

The Plan involved investment in 280 outstanding members of academic staff from around the world; renewal of our infrastructure; revitalisation of our estate and changes to our ways of working. We are still on that journey and it's going rather well. The entry grades and satisfaction of our students have never been higher, our research grant and contract income has never higher and the quality of our estate has never been higher. For example, only last month we opened the largest student sports facility in central London, hot on the heels of several refurbished buildings and six innovative underground lecture theatres.

Of all our achievements though, our most challenging has been to balance our books after seven years in deficit and our most significant has been that of doubling the proportion of our academic staff undertaking world-leading or internationally excellent research. At the end of last year, the Government's Research Excellence Framework confirmed that in terms of research quality we were the most improved university, per funding council pound, of any in the UK. And last month this was translated into a welcome increase in our core research funding.

However, effecting such a rapid change in City's performance was in many ways easier than the less tangible and much longer-term challenge of repositioning ourselves in terms of both our internal partnerships and our external partnerships.

At the start of our journey in 2010, City University London was a federation of very successful Schools. Each could be observed to have a strong history, identity and culture and to operate as

independent small stars in the broader academic firmament. However, the market-driven pressures of the previous decade had clearly made this a rather isolating, unsafe and expensive place to be.

Our clear challenge continues to be that of working in partnership: internally, with ourselves and externally, with like-minded universities in this great capital city of ours.

Internal partnership is, of course, crucial if, to quote Aristotle:

“The whole is to be greater than the sum of its parts”;

while developing and fostering external partnership within London has been a very public aspiration of City since as long ago as 1924.

For example, at the time of City’s centenary celebrations in 1994 the Vice-Chancellor of the day, Professor Raoul Franklin noted that:

“City’s future is inextricably bound to the prospects for London as a great international City. The full networking of London-based institutions has yet to be achieved. The tremendous potential strength of London as a centre for education is not fully realised”.

Our two-step ambition, first to work together as ‘one City’ and then, in partnership with others will take rather longer to achieve than the somewhat swifter change in performance I described at the beginning of my speech. Fortunately, we have many inspiring examples of this journey of partnership to learn from. Some of the best-documented examples are the coming together of communities, states and cities to form strong countries that are then eager to form alliances and unions with other like-minded countries. We tend to think of Latin American countries such as Brazil, which used a mix of politics, patriotism and the power of personality to move from isolated autonomous states to their current position, as a strong partner within the Latin American trading bloc.

The British Museum’s excellent and very recent exhibition on Germany provides an example much closer to home. The exhibition was curated around that country’s complex transition from a group of powerful and independent Hanseatic League cities that came together in the 19th century and emerged from the 20th century as a confident nation at the heart of Europe.

We will, of course, maintain our purpose, as that is what we do; we will further increase our performance, as that will benefit those we serve. However, we will continue to increase our emphasis on partnership within City and partnership beyond City. For it was Sir Winston Churchill who noted that:

“If we are together nothing is impossible”.

Thank you.