Accessible version of Student Education Bulletin Autumn 2020

Below are the full columns, news stories and features for the Autumn Student Education Bulletin 2020 in an accessible format.

# Comment: Simone Buitendijk, Vice-Chancellor

## Vice-Chancellor, Professor Buitendijk, writes about the importance of Community here at Leeds in her first Student Education Bulletin column.

Let me start by thanking each and every one of you for the incredible efforts you’re making to ensure we continue to offer our students the best education and experience possible in what are truly exceptional circumstances.

These are challenging times for us all – professionally and personally – but the sense of community and togetherness I’ve already witnessed during my time at the University, from students and staff alike, is hugely motivating and inspiring. The ingenuity, dedication and expertise of our entire community is incredibly impressive.

Indeed, it’s this overriding sense of community that attracted me to this job – it’s something very special. While we must never lose sight of the fact covid-19 is a tragedy with a huge human and economic cost, if we continue to work together, in partnership, we can emerge from this crisis stronger and create a better future for the University and our students.

Please be assured that I’m also acutely aware of the enormous pressure we’re all under as we strive to deliver our core missions. We all have individual stories about how covid-19 has taken its toll on us, as well as the one we share as a community. I know a lot of you have been working above and beyond the call of duty, but we need to remember to take care of ourselves. We are absolutely clear that our number one priority and responsibility is to protect the health and safety of the entire University community.

Aligned to this, we want to put our students’ education and experience at the heart of our decision making. Whilst the circumstances are not as I would have predicted, I’m honoured to have been given the chance to lead the University in this mission, and to help build on our already considerable impact, locally and globally.

Universities are strong change-makers; I believe we are the only networked community that can truly solve global challenges. We will do this through cutting-edge research and by training the next generation of global citizens.

Viewed as an outsider looking in, we have an enviable reputation as a research-intensive university with strong innovation in student education. All it needs is for us to combine our efforts and become more collaborative and inclusive, both within universities but, most importantly, between universities globally.

We have some real advantages at Leeds, through our culture of harnessing our breadth of expertise for societal benefit, our sense of community and a track record of outstanding impact.

Another strength is the way we help our students make the transition from a local to global context. An example of this is ensuring we attract students locally as well as from further afield, including those who in the past might not have accessed higher education, as well as supporting those taking on internships or volunteering work in the region.

Part of this equation involves thinking creatively about education and responding to what our students tell us they want and need. They are very much our partners in all this.

One example is digital education. While by necessity we’re delivering teaching via a hybrid model, the potential of online learning to overcome barriers of geography, background and culture, so that our students can benefit from a truly global classroom, is immense and transformational. This is why the University Council has agreed to recruit a Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Digital Transformation. Given the need for pace in this area, the Council has endorsed the appointment of Professor Neil Morris, the current Dean of Digital Education, to act as Interim DVC.

As those of you with access may have seen, I gave an interview to the Times Higher as I entered this role, setting out my initial thoughts on the future of education. The headline – Lectures’ Days Are Numbered At Leeds As New V-C Takes Charge – may appear a little stark, and I can assure you I have no current plans to abolish lectures at the University, but I’m excited by the potential of new approaches to research-led education.

I believe it’s clear that the direction of travel, for the whole of higher education, is towards developing pedagogical models that put our students at the very heart of their learning. This will involve looking at elements such as the duration and format of the traditional lecture, and also at areas including co-creation of educational content with our students.

What our students need from us is changing as the world is changing, and that will require thinking differently about our pedagogy. And the covid-19 response is requiring us to press the accelerator on this a little harder.

While this may sound daunting, along with Professor Peter Jimack, our Interim Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Student Education, I want to talk to our University community – staff and students – to hear your views about the future of education so that we take this journey together. We were able to touch on aspects of this through the successful town hall sessions, and I will be saying more about it in the coming weeks.

Being a leader is not about singlehandedly having all the right answers. The best solutions, whether it’s during a crisis or beyond, stem from harnessing the innate drive and collaborative power of the team and the community.

My role is to help find a vision and focus that everybody can get excited about, and then pave the way for the innovators, for all the brilliant people out there – staff and students – to go in that direction. I look forward to continuing the great work already underway at Leeds right across our disciplines and activities.

We are one community and together we can contribute to a better world.

Ends

# New interim Deputy Vice Chancellor: Student Education announced

## PROFESSOR Peter Jimack has been appointed as the interim Deputy Vice Chancellor: Student Education – and he has begun his tenure by paying tribute to the work of his predecessor.

Council approved the appointment with immediate effect of Professor Jimack in his new senior leadership role at the University of Leeds.

The former Executive Dean of the Faculty of Engineering thanked former DVC Professor Ward for his hard work during the last four years and paid tribute to his contribution to Student Education at the University.

He said: “I’d like to express my sincere gratitude to Tom on behalf of all the staff and students for his commitment, hard work and considerable achievements across Student Education at Leeds.

Tom always put colleagues who teach and support learning at the heart of his work and, under his leadership, we have made great strides in further strengthening the Partnership with our students to provide an inspiring, challenging and supportive community.

“This has enabled, and continues to enable, all of us – students and staff alike – to realise our potential and achieve our ambitions.

“We now wish him well in his future endeavours.”

Prior to this appointment, Professor Jimack was Executive Dean of the former Faculty of Engineering for nine years to 2019, and before that a pro-dean for three years.

An open international recruitment process will begin soon for a permanent appointment to the role of DVC: Student Education.

Ends

# Comment: Interim Deputy Vice Chancellor: Digital Transformation

## In this edition of SEB, Neil Morris, the newly appointed Interim DVC: Digital Transformation, reflects on the hybrid delivery model for student education.

In June this year, we established a set of Education Delivery Principles for 2020/21 that set out a vision of a: ‘Student-centred active learning approach to deliver a high-quality research-based education in a hybrid mode, as part of a supportive, enriching and community-focused experience.’

To support delivery of this vision, we invested in additional digital education capabilities in time for the 20/21 academic session, to work alongside our existing extensive digital education ecosystem.

We also provided extensive support, guidance and training for staff delivering a student-centred active learning approach, through an online course, programme and module templates, case studies and guidance materials.

The University’s hybrid delivery approach offers a number of potential advantages for student education, including inclusivity, access, flexibility and personalisation.

The increased use of Minerva to provide students with learning materials in multiple formats supports access, flexibility and inclusivity, and the student-centred active learning approach supports interactivity,personalisation and inclusivity.

The process of module redesign for hybrid delivery has also led us to create online resources in line with newly introduced legislation around accessibility and inclusivity, and has resulted in changes in assessment practices that should lead to more inclusive, flexible and authentic assessments.

As we proceed through this Autumn term, we are starting to hear about the positive impacts of our hybrid delivery model on students’ learning and their holistic experience.

In particular, the experiences of using our virtual classrooms for synchronous, interactive, learning are proving effective, and are popular with students.

Some common themes have emerged around the benefits for student participation in large group online virtual classroom settings, with staff observing that students have been more ready to post questions and share examples using meeting chat than they would be in a large face to face session.

Also, staff have noted that students have found it easier to attend online tutorial meetings than traditional campus-based meetings – anecdotal evidence suggests attendance at academic personal tutorial meetings is higher this year than in previous years.

We are also hearing about innovations in student education approaches that have arisen as a result of the hybrid delivery model – right across the university, colleagues have created student-centred, active learning activities to engage and motivate students.

We will be publishing a range of case studies to illustrate the impacts of hybrid delivery shortly, and we will be surveying teaching staff about their experiences.

Currently, anecdotal feedback from students is positive.

Some examples which demonstrate colleagues’ strong commitment to student learning, community and support include: “The sessions are incredibly helpful to be productive and they offer a real sense of social connection with others in the university while we are all dispersed due to Covid”, and “The transfer to online learning has been rather smooth for this module.

The mix of live and pre-recorded material/sessions seems to have worked well”, and “Thank you so much for being such an amazing teacher, and for your support today it was really reassuring”.

We will be surveying all students about their experiences of the hybrid delivery model in November and will report the findings as quickly as possible.

Of course, we recognise the challenges with hybrid delivery, particularly in relation to technological issues, digital poverty and the sense of belonging, community and the holistic nature of a university education.

Many colleagues are actively working to address these challenges, and we will continue to learn and improve the experience for students studying in this way.

The continued development of opportunities for discussion, interaction, collaboration and sharing through innovative, creative and co-created use of our digital technologies enables social learning communities to be established and nurtured.

There is a strong partnership culture within all members of the University community that has been demonstrably reinforced by this situation, and initiatives that we are introducing will have clear and long-lasting benefits.

Ends

# Comment: University Union Education Officer, Carolina Hall-Rodriguez

## Newly elected Education Officer, Carolina Hall-Rodriguez, writes about her introduction to life as a University Union executive officer and sets out some of her objectives in her SEB column.

It has been a whirlwind start to the new academic year, and it is hard to believe that it has already been three months since my induction in the summer.

Since then, I have been working closely with University and LUU staff and taking every opportunity to advocate for our students at each level of governance in the University.

This year poses many unique challenges for our students, and so student voice and our representation structures are absolutely critical in maintaining and improving the student experience. One of the key components of this is our School Rep system, and this year I am lucky to be working with a wonderful group of Reps, who have all made a brilliant start in extraordinary circumstances.

Recently, I chaired my first Education Assembly of the year, which is usually attended by School Reps and the Academic Representation Team from Leeds University Union. This time around, we were fortunate to welcome two guests; Prof. Tom Ward (former DVC: Student Education) and Prof. Neil Morris (Dean of Digital Education) who were able to answer some really important questions posed by the Reps. The Reps also had time to discuss what they perceive to be the biggest challenges and opportunities for students this year.

It is crucial that the Reps are able to ask questions and have these discussions in order to empower them to make changes in their School, so this Education Assembly was a really valuable opportunity to strengthen the Partnership.

Since term began, an important area of focus has been the provision of online teaching and learning for our students and the changes that come with this.

I want to ensure that our students are empowered to be co-creators in their education, and one of the key ways to achieve this is through their reps, and through encouraging positive relationships between students and staff where feedback is constructive and reciprocal.

Ultimately, in a time of such constant change, it is really important the support we offer students, and my role in representing them, stays constant throughout.

Alongside my work supporting the Reps, I continue to develop and further my priorities and objectives for the year, one of these being improving the experiences of Black and Minority Ethnic students at the University.

One of the main areas of focus for this objective is to increase the number of Black and Minority Ethnic students who progress to Postgraduate Research, as currently, these groups are underrepresented in the PGR community.

Recently, I had the opportunity to speak on the panel for an event ran by the Careers Service for Black History Month, where I spoke on this objective and my aims to encourage Black and Minority Ethnic students to pursue Postgraduate Research by demystifying it.

Another key area of focus for me is campaigning to close the ‘BAME’ Awarding Gaps, and the main strands of this work are bridging the gaps between students and staff by increasing communication and improving cross cultural understanding, and decolonising the curriculum.

I look forward to sitting on a newly formed Decolonising the Curriculum Working Group to further this important agenda.

Finally, I’d like to finish by highlighting the great work that is currently going on for Black History Month, and to commend our excellent student leaders in all they do.

Ends

# News: LITE Fellow publishes book on language and teaching practice

## BETTER understanding the barriers and challenges to teaching English for academic purposes in an international context is the subject of a new book penned by one of the Leeds Institute for Teaching Excellence’s (LITE) first Fellows.

Associate Professor Bee Bond’s book: Making Language Visible in the University (English for Academic Purposes and Internationalisation), focuses on the meeting of language, disciplinary content and knowledge communication against the background of the economic, cultural and ideological forces of Higher Education’s current push for internationalisation.

Bee’s LITE project -The Role of language in discipline-specific knowledge and understanding – sought to understand the significant role language plays in shaping discipline-specific knowledge and understanding; smoothing international student transitions.

Bee was appointed as one of the first cohort of LITE Fellows in 2016 and now uses the evidence and outcomes of her project to inform changes to the way English for Academic Purposes (EAP) is embedded across the curriculum at the University of Leeds.

In her latest book, Bee suggests the need for a greater synergy between language and content experts and argues that change needs to be implemented through policy rather than on an ad-hoc basis by individual teachers.

Bee said: “This book expands on the ideas developed during my LITE project and is written for anyone involved in teaching in Higher Education.

I hope that readers will find suggestions, ideas and even solutions to some of the questions that puzzle them about their own practice when teaching in an international university, and that the importance of language becomes clear.

Dr Alex Ding, Director of Scholarship at the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies, at the University of Leeds, said:

“Bee’s book is highly significant for a couple of reasons. Firstly, the importance and impact of language in Higher Education (HE) for students and staff is given centre stage by Bee, revealing the complexities, tensions and politics surrounding language teaching, policy and subject teaching in an international university.

“Secondly, and equally importantly, Bee’s publication is a brilliant example of the role and impact of scholarship in HE and serves as inspiration for all those who place teaching at the heart of their activities.

“It serves as a reminder of how scholarship can have significant impact in universities.”

You can buy the book on Amazon.

Ends

# ‘We must create a community in which structures of opportunity are opened’

## Too often the higher education story of black and other under-represented students is perennially one of under-performance, lack of ambition, engagement and attainment writ large by data. LITE Fellow Dr Iwi Ugiagbe-Green outlines her project here and asks whether we are using the right language to frame the discussion, and how harnessing the student voice is imperative to progress.

I am delighted to be awarded my commissioned LITE Fellowship, which provides me with an amazing opportunity to engage in educational research that I feel and know is important.

The project will be a real challenge to deliver over the 3 years of its duration.

It has institutionally set targets that aim to make a real difference to the experiences and success of ethnically minoritized – more of that later – students here at University of Leeds.

However, this opportunity comes at a hugely emotive, disruptive, turbulent and reflective time for me and others working hard to cope with the impact of the global pandemic on our day to day lives.

Of course, so much has happened since the start of the year in January when I was very surprisingly asked to give my first TEDx.

I chose a theme that I was hugely important to me and gave the 18 mins talk, ‘Lets talk about being black in the academy.’

I reflected on my career to date as an academic, the interplay of race and identity in carving out a career in higher education and the responsibility that I have in inspiring and supporting other black students in the academy working to achieve their aspirations.

The title of my TEDx was inspired by #Talkaboutblack, which was pioneered by Gavin Lewis, Managing Director (UK, LGPS) at Black Rock; one of the world’s pre-eminent asset management firms and a premier provider of investment management.

#Talkaboutblack is a movement dedicated to increasing the representation of black professionals in the Asset Management industry.

Gavin Lewis, has been open about his struggles with racism when entering spaces that are not meant for people like him, his identity as a result of having no father from the age of four and ‘ the shocked looks on people’s faces when they realize Gavin Lewis is in fact a black man.

I am not a senior leader, but I would like to think I have done relatively well in my career to date.

As I think about my working class up bringing, about often being the only black woman at different (accounting) education events or the expressed surprise of people who see my name and then hear me speak, I note that there are many parallels with the experiences of Gavin Lewis.

It is important to note that the experiences of black people in these spaces; the academy, professions & wider society is not homogeneous; “it is as rich and diverse as the shades of our skin.”

What is clear, is that the experiences of our ethnically minoritized students within the academy, are impacting on their ability to thrive, to be their best self and to achieve their potential.

This is made stark by the various gaps we see impacting on these groups as they move through theacademy; the awarding gap, the achievement gap, the employment gap, the pay gap.

Now, my reference to ethnically minoritized students, acknowledges that whiteness is centred as the norm in the academy, so that anything that is non-white, is minoritized, so much so, we have a ubiquitous term for it “BAME” – Black and Minority Ethnic.

Let me be clear about this, there is no such thing as a ‘BAME’ student or a ‘BAME’ member of staff.

There, I have said it. BAME is a term that was coined by people for whom the term does not relate and is used in official higher education policy, data, reports and statistical returns.

It is heartening to note that there are important and inclusive conversations going on in the University in which this reductive term of ‘BAME’ is being acknowledged as problematic and is being de-constructed.

Some of these events are student-led, such as, “The Language in Equality and Inclusion: The Perspective of Students” event on Wednesday 30 Sep 2020. An event in which students speak about the impact that othering (and lack of representation within the academy) has on them as individuals, their student experience and their sense of belonging.

Some of you reading this may think, ‘what’s the issue?’ It’s just a way of categorising non-white staff and students and we need to do it somehow for data collection, analysis etc.

It is of course a useful term to shine a light on the inequalities that exist between white and non-white groups and is unifying in that sense.

However, there is a central issue, which is one of power and control.

BAME as a collective term is so problematic, not least because from a data perspective.

The complexity and specificity of issues relating to a wide range of different ethnic groups is lost by just aggregating non-white groups together.

Poor quality data and information leads to poor, ineffective decision making. ‘Targeted interventions,’ in other words, ‘personalised, data informed, evidence based strategies of support’ for different student groups, in different contexts have less chance of being effective, if the data does not give an accurate context on which those decisions are to be made.

There is an unpalatable irony in othering non-white ethnic groups, then suggesting to those very groups; the very people for whom it is used to describe and wish for it to be changed, that finding an alternative to a term not chosen by them would be ‘problematic.’

The persistent use of ‘BAME’ in policy conversations, curricula and other formal education spaces, in positioning and framing descriptions of ethnically minoritized staff and students’ experiences is one that further disenfranchises and erodes a sense of belonging within the academy.

Identity has emerged as a critical issue from the research that I have been undertaking with students in exploring their experiences during their student journey and transition into the graduate labour market.

The shaping of students’ identity is complex, but one’s sense of self, belief, confidence undoubtedly impacts on one’s success.

Students are not absolved of responsibility in the pursuit of success, but we have to create a community in which structures of opportunity are opened up and equality of opportunity exists for all.

We are, even unwittingly, creating spaces in which some students do not feel that they belong.

Spaces where they feel that they cannot be their authentic self and are othered.

Spaces where they are not represented by the academics who teach and research with them.

Spaces in which they are feel that they are not understood. Spaces in which they do not see other students like them being celebrated for being successful based on their authentic self.

As a result, some of our students are not achieving their potential.

A black student who enters the academy with AAA is less likely to achieve a ‘good degree’, 2:1 or 1:1 degree classification, than a white student with BBB. (See Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic student attainment at UK Universities: #Closing the gap, 2019).

‘You cannot be, what you cannot see.’

I want to ensure that our “BAME” students are seen, that they achieve their potential whilst they are with us, and do not experience inequity of life opportunities and choices that may result due to not “succeeding” at University. Harnessing the student voice and engaging students inclusively, actively and continuously with this project is going to be critical to its success.

So what is the central issue at the heart of the Fellowship project?

Institutional data aggregated at the “BAME” level, reports an institutional “BAME” awarding gap here at Leeds, between 2013/14 and 2017/2018 has risen from 11.6% to 12.7% with a three-year trend of this gap widening.

Although aggregation of ethnic groupings into “BAME,” masks larger disparities in attainment, impacting on black students in particular: the gap between Black and White students was 28.9% in 2017/2018 (mean average of 25.9%); the gap between Asian and White students was 16.6% in 2017/2018 (13.3% mean average gap).

The reasons for these gaps are complex but with this exciting 3 year LITE Fellowship, I aim to make a difference and work towards closing these unacceptable degree awarding outcomes.

Ends

# LITE reimagines Share, Adopt, Adapt Workshops, by Dave Riley, Research Support Officer.

At LITE, our approach to online delivery has been to reimagine our content offerings for the work-from-home era.

We’ve looked to continue to showcase pedagogical research and practice in ways that are accessible and inclusive for those that attend our events and watch our videos, and ways that are not workload-heavy for our contributors.

In July, in conjunction with the TIPS Community, we re-launched our popular Share, Adopt, Adapt Workshops (SAAW) with a focus upon sharing experiences, techniques and strategies relevant for online teaching online.

The events are relaxed and informal in tone and see up to three presentations of around 5 minutes, before the floor is opened up for questions.

This quick and flexible method of delivery has proved extremely popular.

There have been 554 attendees to the 10 workshops we have held, and a further 234 views across our MS Stream channel.

To illustrate how the workshops operate in practice, our SAAW from August 18th, How to make your teaching accessible and inclusive provides an illustrative example.

Jenny Brady, Inclusivity Project Lead at LITE, explained the opportunities and challenges that an online teaching environment can provide.

Whilst digital accessibility removes barriers for a number of students (e.g. for those that commute), others may not have a suitable work environment or access to appropriate digital tools.

Jenny’s talk was followed by Kirsten Thompson, Digital Practice Advisor at OD and PL, provided practical advice on how to ensure that an online presentation can be as inclusive as possible.

Kirsten explained how the use of natural light, a plain background and the elimination of distracting habits can make a huge difference.

Dr Alice Shepherd rounded off the event with a presentation on the use of the Ally tool within Minerva to assess levels of accessibility and inclusivity.

In the spirit of Alice herself went away having learned a lot. After the event and in the spirit of collegiality encouraged by the workshops, Alice had learned a lot from the other speakers.

Dr Shepherd said “Jenny and Kirsten’s presentations left me thinking more thoroughly about the more holistic aspects of accessibility.

“I knew about using headings and alt text, for example, but the event taught me about text contrast, size and approach in terms of structuring materials which I think will make them better for everyone. The event reinforced my perception that focusing on accessibility is good for all students”.

The sessions have not only played an important role in sharing best practice at the University but have promoted a sense of community among those looking to provide the best possible teaching experience in the COVID era.

At LITE, we’d like to take the opportunity to thank all of the presenters for the time and great effort that they have put into sharing their practice with their colleagues across the University. On a personal level I’ve found the sessions enjoyable to organise and fun to host and I look forward to more as the academic year rolls on.

All of our SAAWs, including our most popular sessions on Building a Student Community Online, the SCALA method and Language Centre Staff’s experiences of pre-sessional teaching are recorded and available on our MS Stream Channel.

Ends

# Focus on Pedagogy

# IN each SEB we look at pedagogy research (PedR).

# This edition features LITE's Andrew Moffat, who examines the image problem for PedR and how higher education is working to solve it.

## Overcoming an Image Problem. Focus on Pedagogy research by LITE’s Andrew Moffat

Pedagogic research is more important now than ever before.

Modern universities are student-centered and impact-driven, and fee-paying students have every right to expect that their education is continually honed, refined, and researched.

On top of this, the pandemic has caused a seismic shift in teaching patterns right across the sector, and the need for evidence-based practices that underpin and reinforce the continued excellence of HE teaching has never been more urgent.

Despite this clear mandate, PedR still struggles to shrug off an image problem that has afflicted it for the past two decades.

The field has historically had difficulty establishing itself as an area of serious academic study.

There are a number of reasons for this, but PedR advocate Tansy Jessop characterises the underlying problem as the field being “at home everywhere and nowhere”.

PedR is inherently trans-disciplinary in nature. All academics (or at least all those with teaching responsibilities) are professional education practitioners as well as experts in their discipline.

As such it seems only natural that they might be inclined to extend the intellectual rigours of their research to an exploration of their teaching.

But the strong bifurcation of teaching from research in academia requires academics to wear quite different hats for each of these roles.

Some researchers find that their PedR hat finds less favour than their discipline-specific hat in discipline-based recognition and reward structures.

Then there is the problem that pedagogic research projects, especially those that gather data from within the HE institution in which they are undertaken, risk being seen as introspective and lacking in external impacts.

As impact continues to grow in importance as a measure of research value, projects without such ‘real world’ effects struggle to attain recognition.

This was cemented in the wording of the REF 2014, which stated that “[i]mpacts on students, teaching or other activities within the submitting HEI are excluded”.

While the guidance added that “[o]ther impacts within the higher education sector, including on teaching or students, are included where they extend significantly beyond the submitting HEI”, the grey area between these two statements was enough to discourage PedR submissions to the REF, and as a result only 9% of submissions in the Education Unit of Assessment focused on HE.

While it is true that unsystematic projects surveying in-house student populations, without the methodological rigour or theoretical foundation to connect with what Jessop refers to as the ‘big conversations’ in education, would indeed lack academic credibility, a glance through some of the many leading international PedR journals demonstrates that this simply isn’t true of a vast amount of pedagogic research.

Fortunately, attitudes do seem to be changing.

The wording of the submission guidance for the REF 2021 has more detail and nuance than its 2014 counterpart, opening the door for PedR to attain greater recognition in this most crucial of measures. 2020/21 is likely to be remembered as a watershed moment for teaching practices in HE.

It is vital that the changes to come are guided by insightful, impactful research, and that such work is given the respect and recognition that it deserves.

LITE provides a space for such research, enabling our Fellows to explore the nature of teaching and learning in today’s rapidly evolving HE landscape, and working in partnership with departments across the University to maximise the value and impact of Leeds PedR.

Ends

# Profile

## Each new edition of the Student Education Bulletin we’ll shine a light on a different aspect of the Student Education community at Leeds. This edition sees the University’s first ever International Officer, Franks Feng, take his turn in the Bulletin’s Q&A hotseat.

The International Officer post is new to the University, can you outline what the role will entail?

Hello. I’m excited to tell you more about myself and I look forward to working with many of you in the coming months, discussing issues faced by international students and their academic life, based on their feedback.

I will represent the student voice as the first-ever International Student Executive Officer at Leeds University Union (LUU), it is my duty to build up a foundation and long-time project for this wonderful role, working closely with other student executive officers as well as feeding in international students’ perspectives.

What do you hope to achieve in your tenure and what do you think will be the most challenging parts of your role?

As part of the my role, I hope to amplify the voice of all international students; ensure more international students participate in LUU activities and events; also, to understand the difficulties international students face, and, help overcome them; and to promote a culture of sharing and exchange.

Covid-19 is out of my control, but it still provides a huge challenge for me, especially given as my role will involve speaking with lots of students and organising student events for different groups to get involved.

However, I am not working alone, I work closely with other officers and we all support each other.

During my first few months of working in my new role, I am already starting to understand the structure of the University better, whereas in the past, it was easy to complain that the University didn’t make things change fast enough.

I now understand that successful change needs to be based on research and on the University’s operation, and the resources available. I can’t achieve anything without the other departments.

As a consequence, it will be another challenge for me in terms of internal communications skills: how can I make sure that I talk to the right people? How do I keep in touch with them so we can build together, keep track, and follow up meetings and action plans, instead of leaving them in my notebook.

Another big part of my role is to tackle any racial abuse and discrimination on campus suffered by students. I will talk with students and staff to better understand the situation and will work closely with other officers to ensure the University can follow up with policy and actions.

I’ll also feed into campaigns about anti-racism in order to educate all students to create a real inclusive community, to work towards creating an inclusive community of students, who all enjoy their campus experience.

Which parts are you most looking forward to?

As the first International Officer, I will focus more on long-term projects, and make sure I meet as many students and staff as I can, to make sure the long-term cooperation will keep going, because I will only take this role for a year.

In my opinion, within the University, freedom of thought is one of the key things that student should learn on campus.

University should not focus too much on telling students what they are supposed to learn. Rather, how to think critically and develop new things based on the knowledge by previous scholars, in order to push forward the human world, I feel this is how we should encourage our students to challenge themselves.

I look forward to working with LITE, the Language Centre, and other academic and research-based institutions, with the aim of bringing the international student perspective into the University’s future strategy.

Our University already achieves a high standard for student experience compared with other universities in UK. I want to contribute more on international academic research and reduce achievement gap among all student groups, which includes the decolonising curriculum work.

I believe that the background of students should never decide the dream they want to achieve on campus.

Although my objective this year will cover a diverse area, I prefer to achieve less targets perfectly, rather than join different project but achieve none of them.

Even though Covid may affect our work, I hope in the next year, if everything is back to normal, when the new International Officer takes over my role, I can tell them proudly that: ‘Everything is ready for you to go straight forward. Now you can see my whole year plan and how I’ve delivered it.’.

Tell us about yourself outside your role, what do you like to do in your spare time?

Besides my work I have lots of things to do. I have joined over six societies and experienced lots of great moments.

For example, I worked as a cameraman during the 2019 General Election overnight live news with Leeds Student Television.

I report on international student news for The Gryphon newspaper and Leeds student radio.

I was also the president of filmmaking society and joined the table tennis society for weekly exercise. Through this society I gained lots of helpful work experience and got an internship in Reuters London.

I also love taking photos when I travel to other countries during Christmas and cook delicious Chinese foods as cultural food exchange with my international friends. I love culture sharing and helping under-represented students.

Where do you see yourself in the future?

I want to work in the media industry. I will be so happy if I can be a journalist, reporting issues faced by minority group and help the public understand the issues.

I also hope my journey this year can bring me more ideas for research during my final year study, with more global perspectives.

It is always a pleasure to share cultural knowledge with everyone I meet and educate others to have an international perspective. However, my future all depends on what I am going to achieve this year, and I am confident that I can learn a lot.

Ends