This has been another successful year for Birkbeck. In the National Student Survey (NSS) our teaching was once again highly rated by our students and we maintained our position as the highest ranked multi-faculty institution in London. Moreover, the Privy Council, on the recommendation of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), granted us the right to award our own degrees. Although we intend to continue to award University of London degrees, this provides a significant safeguard for the future.

Moreover, the QAA recommendation was made following extensive review and represents a significant external recognition of our teaching and assessment processes. We also appeared once again in the top 200 universities in the world in the Times Higher Education ranking of what it refers to as the “global elite” or “top one per cent of universities in the world”.

These academic successes are paralleled by a strong financial position. In 2011–2012, as in 2010–2011, we recorded a surplus of over £6.5m. This is all the more remarkable coming so soon after the substantial financial losses due to the withdrawal of Government funding for students studying for an Equivalent or Lesser Qualification (ELQ). Moreover, this has been achieved without compromising the essential mission of the College in terms of flexible learning and research intensiveness.

These academic and financial successes are of particular importance as the College faces more difficult circumstances in 2012–2013, when the entire university sector receives substantially decreased Government funding. The College, in common with all other universities, has had no choice other than to substantially increase its undergraduate fees.

These increases have been mitigated by the success of our campaign for part-time students, resulting in their being able to obtain student loans. Unfortunately, however, there have been significant problems in the introduction of such loans, with students often being given incorrect information by the Student Loans Company (SLC) as to their availability.

Similarly, applications for loans from part-time students were only accepted by the SLC much later in the year than from full-time students and had to be made via paper-based forms rather than online. These various problems led us to introduce the “Our Promise to You” campaign, in which we indicated to students that if we regarded them as eligible for a loan, we would allow them to start their studies and not pursue them for their fees while the SLC processed their loan application.

Despite this, we have seen a significant downturn in enrolments for our four-year degree programmes compared to last year’s record. However, this downturn has been partially compensated by a significant increase in the numbers enrolling on our three-year degree programmes, which allow students to work during the day but complete the course in the same time as a conventional full-time student. These three-year courses were first introduced two years ago and are now available in around 20 subjects with more courses being introduced next year. They clearly represent an example of the College being innovative and responding to changes in the market.

Interestingly, a significant proportion of students on these degrees come from east London boroughs adjacent to Stratford, where we have been working in collaboration with the University of East London. Our new joint building is progressing well and will be completed in time for the
2013-2014 academic year. This will allow us to continue to develop our work in an area with very low participation in higher education.

The impact of the Government’s reforms of higher education will not be limited to undergraduates. In three years’ time, the first students will graduate with £27,000 of tuition fee debt and will be reluctant to pay additional sums for full-time Master’s degrees. I believe that this represents a significant opportunity for Birkbeck. We need to differentiate our Master’s programmes from those in other institutions, indicating that they can be taken both over two years or one year (equivalent to full-time) by studying in the evening. Our one-year students therefore benefit from studying alongside working Londoners but are also themselves free to work during the day, if they wish to do so. This is obviously a unique situation that would not occur with one-year full-time students elsewhere, and our Master’s degrees may therefore become increasingly attractive to those graduating with a large undergraduate debt.

As always, changes in higher education produce threats to Birkbeck and to its unique mission. I believe, however, that the sound academic and financial performance in the last few years provides us with a very solid base to meet the challenges of the future, particularly when combined with our ability to be innovative and to introduce new flexible forms of learning in accordance with the mission of Birkbeck.