The academic year 2012–2013 was a year of major change for higher education in the UK, with government funding being withdrawn for the great majority of courses and a consequent need to greatly increase student fees. For institutions teaching part-time students, such as Birkbeck, the change was even greater with the availability, for the first time, of loans for part-time students.

As I said last year, there were significant problems with the introduction of these loans, leading to misunderstandings about their terms and availability. Moreover, there was considerable reluctance among mature part-time students to take on additional debt. These factors led to a 40% downturn in enrolments for part-time courses across the sector, and Birkbeck was not immune from this, suffering a similar downturn in enrolments in our four-year part-time courses.

Fortunately, this was mitigated by an increase in enrolments in 2012–2013 on our intensive courses, in which undergraduate degrees can be completed in three years. This increase, together with increased numbers of international students and careful budget management, allowed the College to emerge from a difficult year with a surplus in excess of £6.5m.

In this regard, our new President, Baroness Joan Bakewell DBE, has initiated several debates in the House of Lords in which significant numbers of peers have spoken strongly in favour of improved support. Joan has already proved herself a worthy successor to our previous President, Professor Eric Hobsbawm, whose memory is being perpetuated at Birkbeck via our ongoing appeal to support the Eric Hobsbawm Scholarships for Postgraduate History Students (p52).

Eric was the personification of flexible teaching combined with high-quality research, and this dual commitment is central to the mission of Birkbeck today. At the end of 2013, all universities in the UK, including Birkbeck, were required to make submissions to the Research Excellence Framework, which determines government funding for university research. Following rigorous assessment, both internally and in many cases by external assessors, the College submitted over 80% of eligible staff (pp22–24). Although the final verdict on our submission will not be given by the assessment panels until the end of 2014, the fact that we can submit such a high proportion of eligible staff in a clear indication of the high quality of our research activity.

Overall, therefore, the College is in a good position in terms of its academic and financial sustainability. Obviously, significant challenges lie ahead, for example the recruitment of Master’s students in 2015–2016, when new graduates will be burdened with considerably increased debt, and the development of novel e-learning platforms such as Massive Open Online Courses (known as ‘MOOCs’).

As we move towards our 200th anniversary in 2023, I believe the College is well-equipped to meet future challenges, by continuing the pattern of innovation combined with loyalty to our mission.