

This scientist is ready for a university challenge

Social engineering is no part of a university's role and if the government thinks otherwise Durham University vice chancellor Prof Christopher Higgins will soon put it right, as PETER JACKSON discovers.

CHRISTOPHER Higgins comes across as being up for a fight. That is to say that the vice chancellor and warden of the university of Durham is quick to challenge and to dispute.

In fact, some of the questions I put when we meet in his office in Durham's Old Shire Hall, almost seem to affront him.

Of course, being disputatious is no bad thing in an academic and a scientist. Although he nearly wasn't a scientist at all.

He explains that he studied violin for three years at the Royal College of Music, but opted for an academic career after realising he was less musically talented than his three younger brothers and went on to do a degree and PhD in Botany at Durham. He describes himself as "a failed musician", but still retains a considerable interest, playing a lot as an amateur and serving as chairman of the National Youth Choirs of Great Britain.

I suggest that perhaps one normally sees a contradiction between the arts and sciences. He positively bristles.

"There is absolutely not a contradiction! In fact mathematics and music often go together. No, science is the most creative form of intellectual study as far as I'm concerned. It's all about creativity and imagination.

"People think science is about learning facts, it's not, it's about understanding the world we live in." Well, that's me told.

This combative streak makes me think the government is in for a hard time with him if it tries to push its social inclusion policy on Durham. Business Secretary Vince Cable has recently appointed Prof Les Ebdon as the new higher education access tsar, who has reportedly said he would forbid universities from charging

maximum tuition fees if they were not doing enough to widen their social mix of students.

Is Durham coming under pressure to positively discriminate to favour lower social backgrounds?

"We will not positively discriminate to or for anyone, we want the most able students with the greatest potential, that's very clear. It doesn't matter where they come from, they can come from Pluto for all I care. We want the most able students with the greatest potential who will best benefit from a Durham education.

"It's very true that there some areas of the country where students perhaps don't get the schooling or aren't given the ambition by their parents or schools to apply for Durham University and of course if you don't apply you'll never get in. We need to encourage them to apply and enter the competition."

But what if Prof Higgin's philosophy comes into conflict with Prof Ebdon's? "That depends how he does his job. I stick to our policy. Our policy is very clear, we do not discriminate, we do not care what background students come from, we want the students of greatest merit and potential and we will do everything we can to get them. If someone wants to use universities for social engineering and suggest we should take students who don't have the greatest merit and potential then I guess there may be some discussion, but we shall see."

He argues that lowering admission standards would not so much damage Durham's status as a world class university as harm the students themselves, who, if not suitable for Oxbridge or Durham, would not flourish there.

Questions of access and social inclusion aside, Higgins would generally like to see government minding its own business and leaving universities to mind theirs.

"Personally I would minimise any government control of universities. They are autonomous institutions but we have additional regulations on us which pertain to UK students but not to non-UK students, which, to me, is really rather unfair and, if we are not careful, prevents leading UK universities competing with the best universities in the world. Our fees are controlled and there are regulations about the students we should take from the UK, but not from elsewhere and now the government is putting in less and less money it would not be unreasonable that they should relax those regulations rather than tighten them and allow us to compete on the world stage."

The university would like to be free of national pay bargaining to attract the best talent and more than a third of the university's staff are of non-UK origin. "If the government really wants the top UK universities, among which I include Durham, to continue to compete with the best in the world, there needs to be a realisation of greater autonomy and it wouldn't seem unreasonable to give us greater autonomy, seeing they are giving us less and less money."

On tuition fees for example, Durham will be charging the full £9,000 a year from September for UK students, which is slightly below the true cost of tuition.

"We would like to generate enough income from whatever sources so that we could then afford to provide bursaries and scholarships for those students who we want to take because they have the grades, the ability and potential but currently can't afford to come at whatever fees we charge.

"A lot of people think we are a public sector organisation and because government money has stopped we are in financial trouble but, while that may be true for some universities, for teaching purposes less than 1% of our income will come from government by 2014. In financial terms we are in pretty good shape."

Which is just as well for the region, for Durham University makes a significant contribution to the North East economy.

"We have the best university sector in the world, certainly in value for money terms and it contributes enormously to the economy by all the money it brings in - not just student



LEADING THE WAY Christopher Higgins, vice chancellor of Durham University. "It doesn't matter where they come from, they can come from Pluto for all I care. We want the most able students with the greatest potential," he says

income, but research income as well. We win a much higher proportion of European research money than you would expect the UK to be entitled to.

"Universities are autonomous businesses. We are not-for-profit and all the money we make goes right back into research and education but we contribute an awful lot to the economy by competing very successfully worldwide."

The university is a big business for the region by any standards. It has an annual turnover of £255m and more than 3,800 employees. It also has 16,000 students, of whom a fifth are from overseas, representing more than 140 countries.

Higgins is clearly - and understandably - proud of this and loses no opportunity to tell me just how good and important a university Durham is.

"In all the league tables in the UK Durham is now one of the top universities outside of the golden triangle of Oxford Cambridge and London and is challenging them."

He rattles off a whole catalogue of

achievements: 26th in the world in citations for research; 15th in the world for employers wanting to employ its graduates. It is also undertaking a £100m capital investment programme to enhance its estate in Durham with a library extension, new law school, a new student services building, the renovation of other buildings and work at its Queens Campus in Stockton.

"The university is doing very well for itself financially and is also doing very well for Durham and Stockton in terms of being one of the biggest developers around.

"We are growing as a business year-on-year, we are one of the biggest employers in the North East and one of the biggest routes for inward investment in the North East - people bringing money into the North East

“Durham is now one of the top universities outside the golden triangle of Oxford Cambridge and London

from outside, be it from overseas students or from the rest of the country or businesses we work with from overseas.

"It's worth emphasising that Durham is a world university. Some people say: why aren't you here for the North East? But actually we do so much for the North East by being a world university.

"And, bringing influence and skilled people. We have people in this university who are advising the United Nations, are advising the government or business either linked to the university or as former students and that gives the university influence around the world. I've just got back from a trip to the Middle East and we have met with the highest levels of people in government because we have either alumni or students or research links with the leaders of government. That's not just in the Middle East but around the world, we have an enormous amount of influence and everybody knows Durham University and that brings a lot of reputation and credibility to the

North East. "It's probably fair to say there are very few really world class organisations with international influence based in the North East, but one of the few is Durham University. We are a truly global organisation, we have people on every continent including Antarctica."

He regards himself as a chief executive and insists that the university is a business and it is run as a business. He also boasts that it is a well run business and, because of that, it is financially secure. In the last year, following the fees hike, despite a national decline of 10% in university applications, Durham saw a 10% increase. "If they are paying more, students want quality and I think that's why we are getting so many strong applicants."

Not surprisingly, he has a strong academic background. He was born in Cambridge where his father was a Fellow of Trinity College, later moving to Durham as head of the department of mathematics. After his PhD, Higgins won a research council postdoctoral fellowship and entered the emerging

field of molecular biology at the University of California, Berkeley. There followed positions at Dundee and Oxford and in 1998 he was recruited by the Medical Research Council as director and appointed head of division at Imperial College. He has published more than 200 research papers and his team carried out the first clinical trials for cystic fibrosis gene therapy in the UK.

Given all this, does he think the academic life should be open to many more people and is it, for example, a sensible target to have 40% of young people going to university?

"The more people who get a better education the better, for them and for the country. But a single target like that can lead to unforeseen consequences. So, yes, 40% of people into higher education - great! You not only need to have a target for as many young people into higher education as is possible - I'd absolutely endorse that - but it has to be the right higher education for the right student and not just for the sake of it. I think that most people would agree that in the

rush to get large numbers of young people into higher education some have not got the higher education they deserve but I think that that has begun to be rectified as the system works itself out."

Higgins lives in Durham with his partner Jennifer. He has five daughters whose ages range from 17 to 29 and one of whom is an undergraduate at Durham, but, he says: "I never see her except when she wants money."

He is now 56 and has been vice chancellor for nearly five years. I ask whether this is likely to be his last job.

"It is going to be my last job. It's the best job in the world and the pinnacle of my career, so, whenever I finish this job, I shall retire."

To Durham? "No. Durham is such a small place you would be very much treading on the toes of your successor if you stayed around, so you have to move on. Also I live in a university house and my own house and home is in Suffolk, so that's where I shall retire, but I love Durham and my parents still live here, so I shall always have excuses to come back."

QUESTIONNAIRE

What car do you drive? MG soft-top - in Palatinate purple!

What's your favourite restaurant? Any of the university colleges which have the best chefs

Who or what makes you laugh? My daughters

What's your favourite book? Darwin's The Origin of Species the most important book ever published

What was the last album you bought? Violin music by Daniel Bell

What's your ideal job other than the one you've got? Retirement - this is the best job in the world.

If you had a talking parrot, what's the first thing you would teach it to say? Nothing, I like peace and quiet

What's your greatest fear? Heights.

What's the best piece of business advice you ever received? Remember, you work for the good of the organisation, not yourself.

And the worst? From someone who said the university is not a business.

What's your poison? Local cheese and red wine.

What newspapers do you read, other than The Journal? I never read The Journal, I never read local news. I read the Independent and the BBC Online

How much was your first pay packet and what was it for? £14 per week as a lab technician at a school and I gave £10 to my mother.

How do you keep fit? I walk to work and at weekends

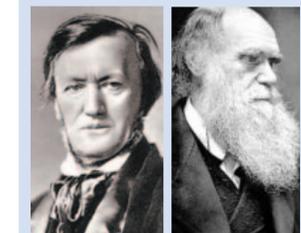
What's your most irritating habit? Assuming people are up to speed with my thoughts without me talking them through them.

What's your biggest extravagance? My Suffolk farmhouse and six acres of land.

Which historical or fictional character do you most identify with or admire? Darwin, who broke the mould on how we think about human beings.

Which four famous people would you most like to dine with? Bede, who formed the English nation; Robert Hook, whose invention of experimentation led to the Enlightenment; Christopher Wren, a real polymath and founder of the Royal Society; Wagner, who was a genius and yet apparently an obnoxious person.

How would you like to be remembered? As a great father to my daughters.



DINNER GUESTS Richard Wagner and Charles Darwin