What would you do for £2billion a year?

Posted on Friday 21st September 2012

Where can Higher Education (HE) find an injection of £14billion over the next decade? It's a pretty big question, and one that you would imagine interests government as much as it does Vice Chancellors and Finance Directors. The answer is simple, a little bit of a mouthful, and showing a resurgence not seen since Joseph Chamberlain and his friends founded the University of Birmingham – philanthropy.

Giving to UK universities and colleges is flourishing, despite the recession, and bucking the overall charitable trends in the UK and the USA. HE attracts more £1million gifts than any other charitable sector. Since 2006/7 the number of donors has increased by 54% to more than 200,000 in 2011; and the value of gifts has increased by 35%, from £513m per annum to £693m in 2011.

That is good news, but the potential to attract further philanthropic support for the things that universities do best – transforming young people, saving lives, and tackling the world's most perplexing questions – is enormous. Just over 1% of our former students give to their universities, while 50% of the UK population supports charities in some way.

So what do universities and colleges need to do? Professor Shirley Pearce's recent report into **the future of philanthropy to higher education (http://www.hefce.ac.uk/pubs/rereports/year/2012/philanthropyreview/)** makes a number of recommendations and dispels a number of widely held myths. The key findings suggest a need for a significant shift in the mindset of many institutions and a focus on listening to the people who give.

Most people don't recognise HE as a charitable cause. This will only change if there is a concerted effort to explain how the sector benefits the UK and beyond. This will take time. Start now and be proud of what we do that changes lives.

Each institution is unique, with its own history, and its own ambitions for the future. Be brave and clear in the definition of a distinctive vision, while being realistic about the extent to which philanthropy can support it. Not every university is Harvard, but gifts can make a difference to every university.

Donors want to support people and ideas that affect positive change. Just because a university wants to do it, doesn't mean a donor will support it. Listen to what donors say and be prepared for a lifelong relationship. At its best, philanthropic support not only adds financial resources to an institution, but also brings the intellectual and emotional engagement of the donor. Universities must embrace this as an opportunity, and not run from it.

Donors like giving. They find it fulfilling and fun. They are not trying to avoid paying tax and they don't want to buy influence. They want to help. Please ask them to help you. Is £2billion a year enough incentive?

Nick Blinco
Director of Development and Alumni Relations

Help the University transform lives with the Circles of Influence Campaign: **www.alumni.bham.ac.uk/circlesofinfluence (http://www.alumni.bham.ac.uk/circlesofinfluence)**

© University of Birmingham 2014