

The premier division

Since he took over as Harvard president in 2001, Larry Summers' style and vision have divided the university. As his plans for expansion step up a gear, Summers tells Helen Pearson why it is time for Cambridge to face up to the need for change.

Two faces of Harvard University sit on opposite banks of the Charles River, and only one of them looks pretty. The attractive side is what you might expect from the oldest and most venerable seat of learning in the United States: weathered brick façades, hushed rooms housing precious intellects, and rows of bicycles to ferry students to the some of the world's most hallowed lecture halls.

The other face of Harvard is one with which few outsiders are familiar, and is, for now, a comparative wasteland. A motley collection of industrial plots, rail yards, disused warehouses and a second-hand car lot make up this side of the university, in the distinctly unprecious Boston suburb of Allston.

It takes considerable imagination to envisage the wilderness of this second site being transformed into an academic hub as vibrant as its historic neighbour. But soon after Larry Summers became Harvard's president in 2001, that was the plan he put forward. Summers, a brilliant economist, gained national prominence as treasury secretary and economic adviser to President Bill Clinton. Under Summers' plan, Harvard intends to spend billions of dollars turning Allston into a campus whose size will eventually exceed that of the university's traditional base in Cambridge.

All change

The Allston plan is just part of Summers' mission to overhaul the university. He also wants to move science centre-stage in an institution that, although diverse, has traditionally enjoyed particular pre-eminence in the humanities. He plans to revamp undergraduate education — and, contentiously, he wants the central administration to exert more direct influence over the university's traditionally autonomous faculties.

Summers' direct style and sweeping agenda have, unsurprisingly, managed to irk

some Harvard academics. Although their criticism has mostly been internal and low-key, you don't have to wander the corridors there very long to find it. The critics object to the substance of Summers' plans, the way in which he has introduced them, and sometimes even to the man himself. "Some members of faculty dislike him intensely," says one critic, particle physicist Gary Feldman.



Summers understands these criticisms but contends that his plans' benefits will far outweigh any costs. The university, he says, is obliged to embrace the kinds of changes he has introduced if it is to retain its position as one of the world's pre-eminent academic institutions. "It worries me much more if a project has no enthusiastic champions than it does if it has a certain number of energetic detractors," he says.

With a history, assets and a reputation as rich as Harvard's, there is plenty to lose if



Summers is wrong. Founded in 1636, the university is the oldest higher-education institution in the United States. It is probably the wealthiest university in the world, boasting an endowment of more than \$22 billion.

On the academic front, Harvard also flaunts impressive credentials: it shares the number one spot with Princeton in the widely quoted *US News & World Report* rankings of US colleges for 2005, and at the last available count, boasted 156 members of the prestigious National Academy of



Near wastelands in Allston (left) are set to rival Harvard's traditional Cambridge home (above).

Sciences — more than any other institution. Harvard's traditional position at the apex of the US university system also ensures that others tend to follow its lead on questions such as how undergraduate courses should be structured.

Summers' management challenge at Harvard is magnified by the university's strongly decentralized structure. Its roughly 2,400-strong professorial staff is split into a loose federation of nine faculties. Most of these, including the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and Harvard Law School, tend to be clustered around historic Harvard Yard in Cambridge. A second campus, in the larger, neighbouring city of Boston, houses Harvard Medical School and the School of Public Health, and the third campus in Allston is already home to Harvard Business School.

The bottom line

A quaint Harvard expression — “every tub on its own bottom” — is sometimes used to describe the large degree of autonomy that each faculty enjoys. The faculties maintain considerable control over their own affairs and budgets. Traditionally, the president's main activities have been raising funds externally, while offering gentle guidance to the powerful faculty deans. Summers' predecessor, Neil Rudenstine, is said by many staff to have fitted that mould.

Summers stepped into the position in July 2001, when a colossal fund-raising drive by Rudenstine, as well as healthy growth of the endowment, had put the university in a particularly strong financial position. It was already poised to expand physically, after several years spent buying up wide swathes of land in Allston, but the university lacked concrete plans for how this should be done.

The Harvard Corporation, the executive board that appointed Summers, clearly anticipated that his background would help him to make an impact at the university. After building his reputation as an economist at both Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Summers was appointed chief economist for the World Bank in 1991. Under Clinton, who was elected in 1992 largely on a pledge to fix the US economy, Summers came to the US Department of the Treasury, where he became secretary — and the president's chief economic adviser — in 1999.

Summers shook things up at Harvard almost from the day he took over as president. In his inaugural address, he laid out plans to reform the university's undergraduate education, its decentralized structure and scientific research. By the end of 2001, he was engaged in a public row with Harvard's

best-known African-American academic, the philosopher Cornel West, who subsequently resigned and moved to Princeton University in New Jersey.

Encounters such as that one soon earned Summers a reputation among the staff as being opinionated, overly dismissive of their concerns, and even domineering. As one professor puts it, Summers is used to thinking of himself as the brightest person in the room. But in meetings at Harvard, he's likely to be dealing with people who have the same view of themselves.

Shaping history

In an interview last month at the New York Harvard Club, a hushed Manhattan building clad in the university's hallmark shade of crimson, Summers sketched out the key elements of his vision for the university.

A major goal, he says, is for Harvard to invest more heavily in science, particularly in interdisciplinary research. “I believe that when the history of this period is written 250 years from now, what happens in the life sciences and technology during the next quarter-century is likely to be a large part of it,” he says. Without such an approach, he argues, Harvard risks losing its leadership position. “One of the ways in which some of the British universities have lost positions of pre-eminence is by inadequate investment in science,” he notes.

As part of this commitment, one of Summers' first steps in 2001 was to hire the then director of the National Institute of Mental Health, Steven Hyman, to be provost — in effect, his top administrator. The two have already overseen several new science initiatives, such as the establishment of the Harvard Stem Cell Institute — an effort to bring together researchers studying embryonic and adult stem cells — and a department of systems biology, which seeks to understand entire biological systems by analysing large data sets.

Summers' ambitions for science are also evident in a vast, multibillion-dollar fund-raising drive just beginning at the university. Those involved say the details are undecided and that, at this stage, they are approaching key donors to build up the capital before making a public announcement. But they say that the campaign, which is likely to be seeking at least \$4 billion, will probably be the largest the university has ever undertaken — and will be distinguished from those in the past by the large proportion of money devoted to science projects.

To identify the scientific projects that Harvard should invest in, a 15-member task force, established in 2003 and led by Hyman, asked staff for their proposals. The group whittled down the 70 submitted to an initial shortlist of

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13. These include a project to understand the origins of the life in the Universe involving biologists, chemists and astrophysicists, and one to tackle global health, which would bring together experts in areas such as infectious disease, mental health, diagnostics, policy, economics, law and bioethics.

A second goal is to reform undergraduate education. Summers thinks that all undergraduates need to gain a more extensive grounding in modern scientific subjects such as genomics, so that they emerge as well versed in science as they are in the humanities. He also wants to see them all spend some time studying abroad. Both priorities are reflected in an undergraduate curriculum review currently under way at the university.

A third intention of Summers, which he doesn't spell out quite so explicitly, is to transform the collection of traditionally autonomous faculties into a single, more coherent university. He has done this partly by introducing more scrutiny of each school's budget and tenure appointments. Summers argues that this kind of supervision can save the university money, ensure that academic standards are consistent across the institution, and help the university to address academic questions that fall beyond the scope of any individual faculty.

Foundation stones

All of these ambitions will, Summers believes, be furthered by the successful transformation of Allston into a vast, new academic centre. "The very substantial physical resources we have available in Allston will allow us to define the Harvard of the twenty-first century," he says.

In a letter to the Harvard community on 21 October 2003, Summers outlined his ideas for renovating the 200 fragmented acres at Allston. He expects new science and technology facilities to form the heart of the new campus, alongside a new home for the School of Public Health and the Graduate School of Education, new student housing and an array of shops, museums and other attractions to ensure that students and staff alike flock to the site.

The plans for Allston aren't yet complete. But the occupants of the first scientific labs there, probably including the new institute for stem-cell research, are expected to be announced in the first half of this year.

Many academics, particularly those whose favourite projects are likely to benefit directly, are enthused by Summers' plans, and have embraced the opportunity to consider cross-cutting fields. "No past president has given us the freedom to think in those terms before," says chemist Greg Verdine, who has been involved in an initiative that combines chemistry and biology to, for example, try to



No doubt: Larry Summers believes Harvard must change or lose its lead in the academic world.

adjust the action of biological molecules.

But Allston, which embodies much of Summers' broader schemes for the university, has also become a focal point for criticism — particularly among scientists at Harvard.

Problems flared up in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences in October 2003, when staff members were alerted to the release of Summers' letter in an e-mail that they received only a few hours before they were due to discuss it in a faculty meeting. In this meeting and subsequent ones, many staff members expressed doubts about the plan. "To say there is faculty concern and lack of enthusiasm is a massive understatement," says one staff member.

Critical point

Critics raise three main concerns. First, they say that Summers and the administration failed to discuss adequately the best course for the university's development, and that such consultations that did take place were purely cosmetic. "As far as I can tell, Larry and a bunch of other high-level officials met, and then Larry just decided what he wanted to say," says astrophysics professor Alyssa Goodman.

Second, critics question whether an aggressive physical expansion is either desirable or necessary. They argue that the university could fulfil many of its needs for interdisciplinary work by careful expansion and collaboration within Cambridge, and

point out that small departments can be intimate and advantageous for collaboration. "Being big doesn't necessarily mean being good," says Feldman.

Third, they are uneasy about the isolation of the new campus. Its location, perhaps a 20–30-minute commute from the Cambridge campus, could divide rather than unite the scientific community, they say, interfering with the interdisciplinary collaborations it is supposed to nurture. They also worry that it could isolate science from the university's heart at Harvard Yard. "I think creating a science ghetto is a bad idea," says Goodman.

Summers and Hyman are unmoved by the criticisms. They claim that initial dissension over the Allston plans has dissipated as members of staff have had the chance to participate in the planning process, and get fired up about the opportunities there. "If you'd listened to the discussion that took place at a recent faculty meeting, it had a relatively different tone from that at the meeting a year ago," Summers observes.

The two men also brush off the suggestion that expansion at Harvard is unnecessary. Growth and change, they say, is the only way to ensure that the university is able to fully engage in emerging areas of research 50 years from now. "The danger to Harvard is that people run the risk of becoming too comfortable and complacent because it is so successful," says Hyman.

And they urge the critics to engage in the renovation process, instead of opposing it.

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"I've asked people to focus their energy on what they want to do and how I can help them do it — and not to focus as much energy on what they think other people should not be allowed to do," Summers says.

Whether academics choose to follow or fight Summers' advice, they do seem to be learning to live with his approach. Some say that they find his decisiveness refreshing — and preferable to the agonizingly slow and consultative process that sometimes dogged decision-making in the past. "Every time you make a big, bold decision you're going to piss people off — but presidents have to do that," says professor of psychology Marc Hauser.

Nevertheless, in a place that thrives on academic debate, Summers' combative approach will continue to send ripples of dissent through the quads and corridors. And Summers has yet to impress everyone that his way of working is suited to the venerable institution. "You don't run Harvard the way you run the Department of the Treasury," says history of science professor Everett Mendelsohn. ■

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