

**Editorial:**

# ‘Global’ Brexit Britain



Professor Ash Amin is Head of Geography at the University of Cambridge. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2007, and has been the Academy's Foreign Secretary since 2015.

Ash Amin explains  
the international vision  
of the British Academy  
in a turbulent world

I write this wryly on April Fool's day, when the UK should have started its withdrawal from the EU but has not done so yet. The sun is streaming in through my window, perhaps because we are still in the EU. I have been asked to reflect on my four years as the British Academy's Foreign Secretary, and to look ahead to the Academy's international future.

Well, how to put this with a measure of calm? I would say that our future comes with an unhealthy dose of uncertainty that could be deeply detrimental to the UK's future in the humanities and social sciences, posing a significant threat to us all in our research careers and personal lives, at a time of already great pressure in the higher education community. And yes, this is the polite version.

I might mention the dangers that our disciplines face from the UK's withdrawal from the EU – admittedly with some weariness given our repeated attempts to get this message across in the last few years. Our disciplines are world leaders, and we face an unprecedented challenge on a wide range of fronts. Researchers in the humanities and social sciences based in the UK have won more than 33 per cent of all funding given by the European Research Council (ERC). This is more than any other country in any discipline. The funding has been a lifeline for collaborative and larger-scale curiosity-driven research. The UK does very well across the board in the ERC, including the natural and physical sciences in which we often lead the pack – but even here the UK has won 'only' around 20 per cent of the funding ever provided.

Six out of the top 10 UK disciplines with the highest proportions of non-UK EU staff are in our disciplines, which also account for six out of the top seven disciplines with the highest proportion of non-UK EU undergraduates. The attracting, nurturing and development of talented academics in the UK will be deeply harmed by the UK not being able to participate in the ERC in the future. The value of moving up through national research schemes such as the British Academy's Mid-Career Fellowships to larger ERC awards is clearly shown elsewhere in this issue (pages 54–57). We look into an abyss as Parliament and our EU



Under the British Academy's Early Childhood Development programme, Keetie Roelen (Institute of Development Studies) is leading research that is investigating how economic strengthening through comprehensive social protection can effect early childhood development in Haiti. Photo: Sung Kyu Kim.

counterparts decide on whether the UK will continue to be part of – and benefit from – the networks of knowledge and excellence our EU membership has enabled.

More broadly, there is a major tension we face going forward, with current Government policies and messaging. The referendum campaign and its aftermath played on deep public concern about UK national identity, around a host of anxieties, prejudices and illusions that continue to circulate and define diverse positions on EU membership. The country remains polarised along the fault lines revealed by the referendum, and the divisions will not be closed by persisting with the zealous rhetoric and double-speak of Brexit.<sup>1</sup>

On the one hand, the Government has coined the concept of a 'Global Britain', signalling that the UK will 'continue to

be open, inclusive and outward facing', 'resist any sense that Britain will be less engaged in the world in the next few years', as well as have a 'global presence, active in every region; global interests, working with our allies and partners ... and global perspectives, engaging with the world in every area, influencing and being influenced'.<sup>2</sup> Fine words, which make me wonder why the concept cannot include continued deep collaboration with the EU and our European partners.

On the other hand, we have seen the rise of a language of taking back control, border controls and national privileges for a historic people. This language has profound effects on choices about where and how to live, study and/or work.<sup>3</sup> Divisive and inflammatory rhetoric such as 'citizens of nowhere', and an immigration system that is closing down oppor-

1 Ash Amin and Patrick Wright, 'Nation on test: Identity and belonging after the EU referendum' (British Academy, 2018).

2 House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee, *Global Britain: Sixth Report of Session 2017–19*, HC 780, 'Memorandum from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office', pp. 19–20.

3 'Statement on the UK's future immigration system for higher education and research' (British Academy, February 2019); 'Statement on the proposed settled status scheme and European temporary leave to remain for higher education and research' (British Academy, February 2019).



tunities through incommensurate and inappropriate burdens and barriers for international mobility and collaboration,<sup>4</sup> are just a small part of a rebuttal of cosmopolitanism, liberal thought and free movement. These are staple principles for an organisation such as the British Academy, committed to learning and knowing through open engagement, and we will find ourselves having to stand up for them more vociferously in the days to come.

I see these days as turbulent and dark. I sense a growing intolerance of critical reasoning, open debate, and cosmopolitan thinking in public and political culture, reaching for the comforts of not thinking too hard. Thankfully the British Academy's international mission, delivered through our programmes and activities, the diplomacy we engage in, the networks we foster, and the ideas and people we support, remain a beacon for these ideals,

opening us to the world and vice versa. We are for 'citizens of a somewhere' that is both here and there, home and abroad, rooted and mobile.

I am sure the British Academy will continue its international work as such an advocate. That has been my guiding principle as Foreign Secretary. It is essential that we make every effort to maintain the UK's central place in facilitating knowledge and cultural exchange. This is key to ensuring that the UK remains an attractive pole for the very best researchers and research, in turn ensuring that the humanities and social sciences continue to enrich and deepen our understanding of the world around us, and making it a better place for us and future generations. Making the case for the indispensability of our subjects in a turbulent and fast-changing world requires active work, including speaking up for them interna-

tionally.

This we have sought to do vigorously. We work closely with the All European Academies (ALLEA), leading its Horizon Europe Working Group, to influence current and future EU Framework Programmes, engaging with EU Member States, the European Commission and the European Parliament. We have collaborated closely with the Royal Irish Academy on a series of 'Brexit Briefings'.<sup>5</sup> We have also led our community in speaking up for our subjects' excellence as the UK withdraws from the EU, including for the first time convening all seven national academies in these islands to speak with one voice. It is vital that we continue to lead shared European agendas with ALLEA and with other European academies, and not be cowed by Brexit. This is why I am delighted that the British Academy will host the ALLEA General Assembly in

4 'The British Academy: current and proposed immigration policy is undermining the academic sector' (British Academy news release, 22 February 2019).

5 Between October 2017 and December 2018, the British Academy has issued 11 Brexit Briefings. They can be found via [thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/brexit-briefings](http://thebritishacademy.ac.uk/projects/brexit-briefings).

the UK in 2020.

Using our convening power, we have worked to sustain and extend the UK's European and global engagement and collaborations, and to bring together perspectives on global challenges from across the world. We collaborate with our European and US partners on a stream of activities related to truth, trust and expertise, which aim to make the case for the importance of expertise and evidence-based thinking today. Our own expertise and convening power have proved critical in helping to develop dialogue on key questions for the future of UK research. With our International Forum Series, we col-

laborate with the Foreign Office, the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) amongst others to bring our subjects to bear on topical matters. Through the Series, we have helped, for example, to examine the impact of China's 'One Belt One Road' policy from a South Asian perspective.

Future plans aim to enhance further our international partnerships and leadership, by scaling up our bilateral, regional and global partnerships with academies, leading universities and other research partners. This will include research meet-

ings and expert roundtables with partners in India and China, and through work with partners in Africa we will play our part in capacity-building there and more broadly in the Global South.

Our five international thematic priorities – *Conflict, Stability & Security; Urban Futures; Justice, Rights & Equality; Europe's Futures; Knowledge Frontiers* – have been fundamental to our international partnerships, but they also address global challenges and influence international policy debates. For example, some research funded under our *The Humanities and Social Sciences Tackling the UK's International Challenges* programme, has

Under the British Academy's *Cities & Infrastructure* programme, Philip Rode (London School of Economics) is leading research on the governance of urban infrastructures interfaces in Addis Ababa and Dire Dawa in Ethiopia. Photo: Charlie Rosser Photography.



created a toolkit on safeguarding children from sexual exploitation in peacekeeping operations, which is being utilised by the UN Missions in Haiti and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and has also been adapted by the African Union, the OECD, and DFID.

In work supported by our *Cities & Infrastructure* programme, teams of archaeologists, engineers, architects and scientists have identified monuments in Nepal that are likely to be endangered following the two major earthquakes there in 2015, and helped authorities to change the way in which they address conservation.<sup>6</sup> As another example of this critical interdisciplinary approach, our *Knowledge Frontiers* programme has brought together psychologists, geophysicists, geologists, city authorities, emergency managers, architects, artists and local communities to raise awareness and preparedness about the Lembang Fault in Indonesia, which has been recently recognised as active and capable of major earthquakes. All of this research has helped improve not just understanding of vital questions, but also timely international policy engagement and impact. For example, five of our award holders in the DFID-funded *Tackling Slavery, Human Trafficking and Child Labour in Modern Business* programme have been included in the annual UK Top 100 Corporate Modern Slavery Influencers' Index.<sup>7</sup>

To attract the best scholars from across the world and to promote international researcher mobility, we are building international collaborative links through a series of early career researcher symposia. We have successfully delivered symposia in Boston, Delhi and Johannesburg with local partners in the last year or so. The UK-US collaborative seed funding from the first workshop has already been developed into a significant new research project for one group, led by a former British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow with expertise in literature, on the visualisation of gender-based violence in graphic awareness campaigns in Nepal. We wish to expand these symposia to ensure that early career researchers can engage with counterparts across disciplines and borders, so that the UK remains central to the next generation of cutting-edge ideas. We have already additional funding to do so in the Global South in the coming years, and we are looking to scale up this activity across the rest of the world too, with plans progressing with partners in Germany, Australia and Ireland.

We continue to invest in the best researchers in the UK and worldwide. Our *Newton International Fellowships* enable early career researchers to come from anywhere in the world to the UK for two years, with five years of follow-on funding. Our *Visiting Fellowships* have provided opportunities for 89 academics from 34

countries to work with UK partners. Programmes such as these ensure that the UK remains central in global networks; and we are expanding these further through our new *Global Professorships*, which provide world-leading academics an opportunity to work in the UK for four years to develop cutting-edge research and lasting collaborations.

The years ahead are going to be a bumpy ride, no doubt punctuated by more politeness on our part, but I hope also the urgency to proclaim our cosmopolitan commitment. I don't think it naïve to believe that the British Academy has the platform and levers to play a crucial role in shaping an existential future that is safe, knowledgeable and congenial. We are an important voice for our disciplines, for their civilisational worth, and for the internationalism they require. In the last few years we have considerably expanded the Academy's international reach and profile – in the last five years we have increased our annual international funding from some £6.5 million to around £20 million today – through more research programmes, fellowships for UK and overseas researchers, early career and expert symposia, country partnerships, and various efforts of 'science' diplomacy.

I feel compelled to close, as a settled migrant vexed by the growing public animosity towards the stranger, by declaring that the British Academy has the power to resist the devastating mischief that is afoot. We have the means to articulate a vision and set of actions, rooted in research in the humanities and social sciences, showing the value and necessity of a public culture of engagement with the stranger and of openness to the world as the confident way of negotiating uncertainty and turbulence.

I am comforted to know that my successor as the British Academy's Foreign Secretary, Simon Goldhill, shares this view. It has been a privilege to work for the British Academy, and even more so with its international staff led by Philip Lewis and overseen by Vivienne Hurley. What a formidable, dedicated and resourceful team!

**We have the means to articulate a vision, rooted in the humanities and social sciences, showing the value and necessity of engagement with the stranger and of openness to the world.**

<sup>6</sup> See Caroline Knowles, 'Cities and infrastructures: A view from Kathmandu', *British Academy Review*, 33 (Summer 2018), 27–31.

<sup>7</sup> For more on this programme, see Brad Blitz, 'Tackling modern slavery in modern business', *British Academy Review*, 32 (Spring 2018), 27–29.