

# A new age of enlightenment?

*Alun Evans, Chief Executive of the British Academy, considers the highlights of 2017–18, and looks ahead*



Alun Evans has been Chief Executive of the British Academy since July 2015.

What is the purpose of the British Academy? At a time when trust in so many of our national institutions is at an all-time low, this might be a timely opportunity to reassess our purpose and how well we are delivering it.

Shortly after I became Chief Executive of the British Academy, I wrote that ‘addressing many of the modern-day challenges of modern day society ... requires joined up policy solutions informed by science, the humanities and the social sciences.’

Today – as we face the uncertainty of a post-Brexit Britain – and in a world with many immediate and pressing challenges, I believe that statement is even more true than it was three years ago.

The British Academy is more relevant today than it has been at any time in its history because, for example, Brexit will not be ‘solved’ by a better understanding of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (the ‘STEM’ subjects), important as those disciplines are. It will be solved – if it can be solved at all – by applying the understanding we gain from subjects such as history, philosophy, politics, economics, law and international relations to the challenges ahead. In short, applying the lessons of the disciplines that the British Academy represents and exists to champion.

Elsewhere, in this issue of the *British Academy Review*, our President reflects on the growing contribution of the Academy to our national public discourse and the challenge to make our argument widely heard and understood. I am delighted therefore that, in that context, over the past year, the Academy and our work have gone from strength to strength. Our overall funding has increased. We are now supporting more cutting-edge research – especially by early career researchers – than ever before. And our profile, our reach and our influence have never been higher than it is today.

We are engaging with the Government, and with universities and other stakeholders in all parts of the United Kingdom and around the world. Our voice is listened to – not least in the Brexit debate – and on which we published four high-profile and succinct Brexit briefing papers devoted to the Irish question and the EU/UK border.

Brexit represents one of ‘The most important challenges of our time’ – which was the title of a document I wrote with our former President Lord Stern, and with a Foreword from our current President, published by the Academy in November 2017.<sup>1</sup> Lord Stern and I argued the central importance of investing in the humanities and social sciences, alongside investment in STEM subjects, as an essential prerequisite for sustainable growth in an economy such as the UK’s with some 80 per cent based on the service sector. We argued that ‘public investment in research and development can help leverage private and charitable funding.’ And we urged the Government to ‘to ensure that the industrial strategy incentivises higher levels of collaboration between the whole research base, including the humanities and social sciences’.

So, I was personally very pleased that the Government recently made a public commitment to raise the overall level of public and private investment in research to 2.4 per cent of GDP, with a long-term aspiration to reach 3 per cent. That will be essential to driving innovation and creativity in the post-Brexit world in which our country appears likely to be operating.

Over the past year, the British Academy has contributed some cutting-edge, innovative research and thinking to society and the challenges we face.

- Our work on ‘Governing England’ has looked at the implications of devolution for England.<sup>2</sup>
- Our joint publication with the Royal Society, following our review of data governance,

1. Alun Evans and Lord Stern of Brentford, ‘The most important challenges of our time: Positioning Britain to succeed and priorities for research and innovation’ (British Academy, November 2017).

2. [www.britishacademy.ac.uk/governing-england](http://www.britishacademy.ac.uk/governing-england)

has led to the establishment by government of a new body – the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation – devoted to that role.<sup>3</sup>

- Our publication *The Right Skills: Celebrating skills in the Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences* has shown the wide economic benefits provided by the skills acquired from the study of non-STEM subjects.<sup>4</sup>
- And the publication of our reports on social integration have been widely welcomed, not least by the local government and communities' ministry.<sup>5</sup>

The British Academy has continued to showcase the value of the humanities and the social sciences via our programme of events, publications and outreach. This included the first President's Lecture in June 2017 with Janet Yellen (Chair of the United States Federal Reserve System), as well as a wide presence at several festivals, including Edinburgh, Hay and the Oxford Literary Festival. We also took part – for the first time – in the Cheltenham Literature Festival, the Ilkley Literature Festival and the York Festival of Ideas.

The Academy has extended its international outreach and took part in an international festival for the first time, with a lecture by Revd Professor Diarmaid MacCulloch Kt FBA at the Jaipur Festival in India. We remain a partner of the Being Human Festival of the Humanities, led by the School of Advanced Study (University of London) and in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC).

And looking ahead, we will seek to expand our outreach not least by our growing social media presence and via an improved website – which must represent a priority for the Academy over the coming year.

We have played a leading part in providing evidence-based contributions to the Government, and not just the Brexit briefings. As a politically independent Academy, we have also engaged with the main opposition parties. We continue to work closely with the others national Academies to press the case for continued UK involvement in the European research

funding arrangements,<sup>6</sup> post-Brexit and we were pleased that the Prime Minister recently backed this position.

The British Academy remains a key player in the All European Academies association (ALLEA), and we have provided the chair and led much of ALLEA's work on promoting trust in science and research. More widely, we engage around the world in USA, India, China and Japan and elsewhere – not least via our network of international Corresponding Fellows.

For the Fellowship remains at the heart of the Academy's work. We are fortunate to have such a strong and committed Fellowship in the UK and overseas. This year we will elect a record number of UK Fellows: 52. I hope that we will continue to show an increasing diversity in the background of the Fellowship, in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, subject and geographical spread – but all still elected on the grounds of the overriding criterion of excellence.

This has been the first full year of Professor Sir David Cannadine's presidency. It has been a real personal privilege to work alongside and in support of him. He has shown enormous energy and commitment to his role, building on the achievements of his predecessor, Lord Stern. Under Professor Cannadine's leadership we have engaged strongly with the Government, and with the media, to underline the central importance of the humanities and the social sciences.

The President also referred, in his article, to the importance of securing the future of the British Academy at 10–11 Carlton House Terrace. This will be a personal aim for me, and one that I hope to deliver in the coming year. We are now embarking on a major project to fund, develop and expand our base at 10–11 Carlton House Terrace to ensure it remains the thriving centre of our disciplines, and the hub of intellectual debate and research, for many years to come. I am delighted that it looks – at least at the time of going to print with this issue of the *British Academy Review* – as if we will be successful in that venture.

My job is to lead the executive staff of the Academy – which I am enormously proud to do. We have some wonderful members of staff who work in the Academy in support of our Fellowship.

My vision is to provide a coherent framework for research and innovation which firmly celebrates the humanities and the social sciences and their central relevance and contribution to all we do. It will not only promote a more dynamic and productive economy, but also a more cohesive community. It will shape a future based on evidence, reflection and analysis. And it will offer the potential, I believe, for a new age of enlightenment – and one led by the British Academy. ■



3. *Data Management and use: Governance in the 21st century: A joint report by the British Academy and the Royal Society* (June 2017).

4. *The Right Skills* project is discussed in the Ian Diamond interview published in *British Academy Review*, 31 (Autumn 2017), 11–16.

5. The "If you could do one thing..." reports on social integration are discussed in the Dominic Abrams interview published in *British Academy Review*, 32 (Spring 2018), 3–10.

6. These arguments are presented in *British Academy Review*, 31 (Autumn 2017), in the section on 'European research collaboration and funding: Understanding what's at stake for the future'.