



# **Presidential Address by Julia Black, 2022**

[00:00:04] As you've heard, it's been one or two things going on. In the midst of an external environment that we keep saying couldn't be more turbulent until it gets more turbulent. And I think I've slightly become desensitized to surreal external situations because I'm now looking around and thinking "well, it's just more of the same, just more of the same". But I think what is incredibly important at this time is that we have been doing exactly what we have been doing, which is despite the changes and the turmoil in the external environment, we as an Academy, you as Fellows, and the staff together have been focusing on our core purpose, on what it is that we do.

[00:00:53] We've been reflecting quite hard on that collectively over this last year as we've been thinking about the new strategy and the role of the Academy in the 21st century and how we take that forward. And we have gone into that process with our eyes open and with a preparedness to be quite ambitious in our level of change, development and progression. And where we've got to in that is the recognition and some more thinking about our core roles and you've just heard what those are. They are our roles as a funder. And as a funder providing that bedrock of support for humanities and social sciences and those who work in them. And yes, we do that through our funding, and we've been thinking very hard about our different forms of funding schemes. We've been lobbying very hard and very unashamedly for additional funding for those schemes that we can support.

[00:02:02] Also, as you've been hearing, we have to be thinking about ourselves as the home for our disciplines and we can't fund everybody as much as we would like to. So that's why I think for us, Early Career Researcher Network started as a pilot. Within a month – I think – it has become a firmly embedded part of the Academy. We have just been overwhelmed at the alacrity with which early career researchers in our field have come to the Academy, come to the network. It demonstrated to us all – everything that we knew through our own work as academics and the precarious nature of particularly early careers – that we have an awful lot to offer as a community to those who are just starting out. And I have been enormously impressed and quite humbled, actually, by the extent to which our Fellows, all of you have become involved in that network.

Working with the early careers, taking them through, acting as mentors, talking to them, engaging with them, but also to the extent that we've allowed the early careers to take ownership of that network themselves. This isn't us doing things for them. This is us facilitating their ability to take ownership of issues for themselves, forge their own networks and forge their own pathways forward. For me, that's a really important indicator of the expanded role that we already play.

[00:03:32] We know that we already play that role within the UK, but we play that role internationally as well. So you heard about, for example, the BIRI that Hetan referenced which are the international research institutes that we engage with. Through our international division, we also hold workshops with those who are working abroad and who don't necessarily have those networks. Our Fellows will talk to them about how to get published, develop their research, apply for funding, et cetera, so that they too can benefit from the wealth of experience that we have to offer, and which Fellows are incredibly generous in sharing. So we've been thinking exceptionally hard about how we support those who are

within the Academy through our funding and the wider work that we do.

[00:04:21] We've also been thinking very hard – as you've been hearing – about how we influence. Our policy role has grown. And it is something which we are increasingly asked to do by the government, which is to advise them on particular issues. And we are more than happy to do that, but we will also always be wanting to challenge – and to challenge critically – to be setting the agenda and not just responding to it. One of the things that we did, for example, in the Covid Decade Report was we responded to a request to "could we think about what the issues might be for the next decade". That's a fairly broad question.

A hundred Fellows and more gathered together to pull their ideas, their expertise, and their thinking to set forward quite a complex and ambitious programme. But I think what we've also demonstrated is that we have the ability to translate that programme into influence and impact. To take that into government and for some of those elements to be picked up. Not all of it will be, that's fine. We've done similarly in our COP26 work around sustainable development, et cetera . and sustainability and they're just a couple of examples.

[00:05:34] We have been thinking as well about how we engage the immense knowledge that we have across the fellowship and insights into some of that work. Now we know also that, yes, some of this does play to more of our disciplines than others, but we have been exceptionally focused on ensuring that for those subjects, such as languages, which aren't necessarily as easy to instrumentalise as some of our other disciplines have remained a core focus and will continue to remain a core focus. So we've been thinking very hard, therefore, about how we influence and our engagement in that space. We've also been working very hard and thinking very closely about our international collaborations, which I just referenced.

[00:06:18] As you can see, we have that massive cut in ODA funding that went across the sector, a huge rupture in our relationships and our ability to forge and build relationships as an academic community with those working in different capacities in the Global South and beyond. And so we have been working on how can we maintain some of those relationships in different ways. We have new funding schemes which we are trying to see whether we can encourage the formation of networks of overseas collaborations in different ways using different types of levers. So thinking about our international engagement. We are the British Academy but, as scholars, we're not bounded by nation-state jurisdictions. Our work and our influence and own networks extend well beyond that. So thinking about what are our international networks and how can we mobilise those?

We've also been talking with the BIRI about our engagement. I've spoken to them a couple of times and attended both of their forums have been held here. And we're engaging them also on our strategy development and asking them to reflect quite hard on how they see their relationship to be with the Academy going forward and what they would like that to be. So we're cementing that relationship as well in a really positive direction.

[00:07:48] So across the span of what we do, that's our research, that's our policy work, that's our international. We haven't even referenced our publications and our conferences which, again, is a significant area of activity within the Academy and something that we're

focusing on. We know that the open-access agenda is going to come back around again. We're thinking quite hard about that in relation to the monograph space. We know that's something we're going to have to – rising back out the policy agenda – focus on again next year and think about creative ways that we can be addressing that.

[00:08:24] Then finally, as you've been hearing, there's us. There's us as a fellowship. And how can we – now that we can come back in person – both reach inwards but also reach outwards? And in terms of reaching inwards, we know from all the conversations that we've been having across the strategy, that there's a real thirst across the fellowship to be able to engage with one another. Across disciplines, across sections, to forge those cross-disciplinary conversations that was the original inspiration of the Academy to be able to spark, as our Society for Literary Studies, as we started out to be, to be able to facilitate that. Yes, that gets down to the technicalities of room booking and room charging. But as we know as scholars of society, it's structures and processes which indicate and have an influence on how we behave as well as our ideas and our interests. We are being very good humanities and social science scholars, in analysing ourselves and what it is that we need to do to facilitate some of those different interactions.

[00:09:34] Finally, as you've heard in terms of what we're doing, it's also about how we reach out. Our Summer Showcase was just fantastic. I hope that some of you were able to come. The private view was insane, I have to say, in terms of the number of people we had here and the interest that was sparked from across London and the country, of people who came through. But what really struck me was that people have demonstrated a real thirst to come into the Academy, to learn about the different research projects and what people are doing and why it matters.

[00:10:17] I have to also take my hat off A) to the organisers, but B) to those researchers who came along because they were fantastic. They managed to make their research interactive and certainly, through the private view and those two days, they were utterly exhausted by the end of it. Because every time they had somebody coming up saying "so explain to me about your research. So explain to me about your research." And they would do it again and again and again. And that for me was a fantastic illustration of how much people want to engage. It really is for curious minds.

Therefore what potential we have through the building transformation project – that you've just been hearing about – to be opening up our doors and to allow ourselves to bring people both physically and virtually into what we are about, and to inspire people with the passion that we ourselves have, which motivates us, which gets us out of bed in the morning to pursue our subjects, to pursue that knowledge, and to share it in a powerful and compelling way.

[00:11:29] Just in case you're worried that we're only going to be based in London. We're not. You can see the investment we're making in the digital element of our transformation. But also we're going out, we're going on the road. So we have ten British Academy lectures around the country this year. We'll be building on that next year and drawing together so that

the lecture in a particular place will be just one part of a wider set of engagements that we'll be having in that particular place where we go, which might be with early careers, it might be with the deans and faculties of universities, it might be with other different types of communities we'll be engaging with. So we're thinking hard about how we become a British academy around the country, as well as a London-based institution in a beautiful building which we are incredibly privileged to be able to inhabit.

[00:12:20] Finally, before we go and meet our new Fellows who will be waiting for us in the garden and that's an exceptionally exciting moment. I just want to say thank you. The Academy exists, the Academy is what it is because of the work everybody puts into it. So a huge thank you to the staff. Hetan listed out all the things that we do. That is a very collective "we", but the staff amazingly is still at around a hundred. Doing all the different things that we do across that huge waterfront. And they really supply power and sort of provide the machinery, as it were.

It means that all the work that the Fellows put in is actually driven and taken forward. So the staff would be nothing without the Fellows. The Fellows would be nothing without staff. And so I do want to hold my sincere thanks out to the staff and everybody who works here tirelessly pursuing those different activities that we've been hearing about. But also want to thank you the Fellows, both those of you here, those of you online, those of you who staff the committees – as Hetan was saying – run the peer review processes, get engaged in those policy works, sit in all those roundtables with the government, different permutations. Governments change but the issues don't go away. So yet another roundtable comes along. Sincerely, all that work you do engaging with the early careers, everything that makes the Academy what it is.

[00:14:04] Then finally to thank our vice presidents, because they put in huge amounts of work and they all have very busy full-time jobs, as many of you do. So it's been a huge privilege to work with them this year and to work with the staff. I've thoroughly enjoyed it and I still think it's the best gig in town. So on that note, I'm going to formally close our proceedings for the 120th Annual General Meeting and I'm going to invite you to come and meet our new Fellows in the garden. Thank you.