Universities and research under the axe

In the following extracts from his Presidential Address to the British Academy's Annual General Meeting on 22 July 2010, **Professor Sir Adam Roberts** *discusses the challenges confronting universities and other scholarly institutions as they face the imminent prospect of cuts in their funding.*

NEVER HAS the environment in which we operate needed to be questioned more than it does now. For the past year we have been going through a period which might be likened to the 'phoney war' of 1939-40. Everyone knew that a huge storm was brewing, but it had not yet hit the UK in any major way. It is now beginning to hit – especially with this week's announcement that colleges and universities have suddenly had £82 million slashed from their current budgets.

In my address to AGM last July I warned of the problems ahead. It did not require any exceptional gift of prophecy to state:

> There will be an election within a year, and obviously a change of government is a possibility. Whatever the outcome, we know that there will be pressures to make savings in public spending. This is therefore the time to try to shape the public debate, and to ensure that the humanities and social sciences are properly recognised in the life of this country.

That is still our task.

The challenge to Government – and to the Academy

Within the next twelve months a double-whammy is likely to hit higher education in the UK: cuts in funding for teaching and student grants, at the same time as cuts in funding for research. The big challenges we all face – not just within the British Academy, but in the whole field of Higher Education – revolve around two core questions: (1) what is to be the basis of future funding? And (2) how do we get from where we are now to where we are going without inflicting serious damage on the whole system in the transition?

The pressure for cuts

There is little value in simply opposing all idea of government cuts. The fact is that, rightly or wrongly, both the Labour government and the coalition government have been committed to funding cuts, including in the field of Higher Education. We may all wish it were otherwise – and some may wonder why it is that the recession-beating propositions of our distinguished former Fellow John Maynard Keynes (1883-1946) have apparently been summarily rejected. However, cuts there will be, and apparently on a major scale. We cannot usefully approach the debate by saying that there is no room for efficiencies and rationalisation in Higher Education, and no degree courses at all that cannot be improved or even cut. Nor can we ignore the argument that the vast expansion of higher education in the past half-century calls into question the old model, of which all my generation were beneficiaries, of receiving university education free. Vince Cable has gone so far as to argue that 'a model designed for 10% of the population could not be applied to 40%.'[1] And we cannot ignore the fact that the national research budget received a significant boost in funding over the last decade.

In face of the pressure for cuts, what we can do is to assert – as powerfully and persuasively as we are able – that the Higher

Education sector in general, and Humanities and Social Sciences in particular, have achieved extraordinary success both in teaching and in research. They are a huge national asset. Students from all over the world want to study here, and, despite hot competition from elsewhere, do so in ever-increasing numbers. UK research consistently outperforms that of other countries in the various crude measures, such as citation indexes and return on investment, that are used to gauge its impact. Other national institutions, especially in the financial sector, have failed the country and aggravated our exposure to the present recession. By contrast, higher education and research have served the country well.

The case for protection

Does higher education have a case for being protected in some way from the effects of cuts? The answer has to be yes. What has taken generations to build can be destroyed in just a few years. If cuts there are to be, they need to be on a scale appropriate to the situation of Higher Education in this country, and part of an overall strategy for how this sector is to be funded in the future. In other words, if there are to be cuts, they need to be done in a joined-up way. Instead, what we have has been aptly described by one vice-chancellor as an 'increasingly wild debate about who should pay for higher education.'[2]

There has been some insistence, from both the Labour and coalition governments, that STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) subjects should be privileged. While we have made the case robustly for the value of humanities and social sciences, we have never sought to undermine the important claims for resources of our colleagues in the natural sciences. What we do argue, however, is that humanities and social sciences should be valued properly and funded fairly.

Both the Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), Vince Cable, and the new Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, have a social science background. Their recent speeches have also indicated a refreshing awareness of the value of humanities and social science – the very points that the Academy has been making. I would not claim that the Academy's efforts are the sole influence – these are clearly deeply held views by thoughtful individuals – but they represent a sea change from the time, not so long ago, when a Secretary of State could publicly question the value of medieval history. Both have made it clear, however, that every area will need to bear its share of the burden. As far as university teaching is concerned, it is important that there be exploration of alternative funding models involving some combination of permitting universities to raise tuition fees, an augmented student loan system, and a tax on graduates. We are probably destined to go down one path or the other, but before we do so some questions need to be addressed.

Figure 1. *At the Annual General Meeting on 22 July 2010, 54 distinguished scholars were elected to be Fellows of the British Academy; and on 27 September 2010, a ceremony was held at the Academy to admit them to the Fellowship.*

Student contributions

Regarding tuition fees and maintenance support, the British Academy organised an excellent Forum in February.[3] My questions on fees, loans and taxes are obvious and familiar, but require clear answers related to the new situation. If fees are to be increased, what mechanisms will be in place, nationally or within each university, to ensure that the admissions processes are needs-blind, and that those who need a financial package to see them through university actually receive it? And what is to be done about the burden on students doing degrees that lead to careers with obvious social utility but low remuneration?

Last week the Secretary of State explored some ideas about a graduate contribution tied to earnings – which the press immediately labelled a 'graduate tax'. If some form of graduate tax is under discussion, many tough questions arise. The first group of questions relate to fairness: why should a graduate earning the same as a non-graduate pay a higher rate of tax? Is income tax a simpler and better basis for raising funds? The second relate to the statist and bureaucratic character of the proposal: would it weaken the vital link between the student and the university? Would universities supplying resource-intensive provision receive a proper share of the proceeds of this tax, and how would that be calculated? And what guarantees would there be that this hypothecated tax is actually passed on in full by the Treasury? The third group relate to practicality: can funds from this source be generated in time to cover the deficits that universities face? And, since the job market is increasingly international, how can there be an effective means of claiming a graduate tax from those working overseas? Might a graduate tax indeed contribute to a brain drain?

In short, there is a risk of rushing into a new funding model before there has been full exploration of how it would actually work. Much rests on Lord Browne's review of higher education funding, publication of which has been postponed to the autumn. I hope that it

will provide a basis for answering at least some of these questions. Meanwhile, there is huge concern at a situation where cuts appear certain, but what replaces them is not known.

My challenges to the government are simple. Don't ask us to implement cuts on such a scale that they damage successful institutions and disciplines; or, to put it differently, don't wield the axe without a clear plan of how such great institutions are to be funded in the future. Don't make cuts that threaten excellent teaching and research. And work out some plans for how to cross what Steve Smith, President of Universities UK, has called the 'valley of death' – that period between when the cuts kick in, and new forms of income come on stream.[4]

Funding of research: our submission to BIS

The position regarding research funding is no less dire, but has involved the Academy in a greater degree of consultation with government. Last week the Academy published its submission to Professor Adrian Smith, Director-General of Science and Research at BIS, in response to his invitation to the Academy and five other national bodies to submit formal advice on the needs and contribution of the research base in the context of the next Government spending review. [5]

The Academy's submission makes a strong case for continued Government investment in research in general, and in humanities and social sciences in particular. We stress that relatively small cuts, which would make little difference in terms of cost savings, could fundamentally endanger the UK's exceptionally successful research base, steadily developed over generations and one of the country's few world-class assets. We urge that the major challenges we face today – such as economic recovery, climate change, a steadily ageing society and obesity – require analysis and research from a wide range of disciplines including the social sciences and the humanities. We argue that the humanities and social sciences play an indispensible role, socially, culturally, and also economically – not least by attracting income from overseas students.

The Academy's submission highlights the importance of a long-term framework for research funding, of maintaining diversity and breadth across the research base, of focussing on excellence as the primary starting point for assessing the value of all research and of investing in the most talented researchers, so that this country remains a beacon which can nurture the best researchers across all disciplines from the UK and elsewhere in the world. We believe that the current proportional spend between quality-driven research funding (QR) and project funding through the research councils is the right one; and that while the cost of HSS research is low in proportion to that of the natural sciences (and therefore harder to cut without doing fundamental damage), the return on that investment is high.

Furthermore, in what I believe is a unique step, Lord Rees and I have sent a joint letter to Professor Smith, expressing the un-equivocal view of both the British Academy and the Royal Society that that the UK must maintain top class universities able to compete with the best in the world, maintaining the breadth that has led to the country's being ranked second across the world in most disciplines.[6] We state that Britain's research leadership provides two clear benefits: first, a wellspring of new ideas, innovation and economic growth; and second, vital 'absorptive capacity' – the ability to search for, adopt, exploit and diffuse knowledge from other countries. Both are essential to our country's health and wealth, its international reputation and its continued ability to innovate, develop and rebuild our economy. We also argue that the dual support system for funding university research must be retained; and that the major challenges of today require multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches.

We need to argue the case anew. A 25% cut in research funding – and an equivalent cut for the Academy itself – would be a huge waste of potential. It is a tough argument, but one we need to sustain: I believe that the government can still be persuaded to see the case for investment in research.

Cuts within universities

There have of course already been many cuts announced within universities, and Fellows have expressed legitimate concerns. The Academy has a settled policy of not seeking to intervene in the internal affairs of universities, out of respect for institutional autonomy, although this does not rule out what I might call quiet diplomacy. Individual Fellows of course often make their views known robustly, and very properly too, so long as it is clear that this is in a personal capacity. Where the Academy has a clear locus is if there are national trends, or risks concerning the national capacity in a particular subject. On this we have been in communication with HEFCE, which is charged by the Secretary of State to develop a policy on strategic and vulnerable subjects. Research Councils too have responsibilities for disciplinary capacity in research. Our view is that circumstances have changed radically and rapidly: at a time of far-reaching cuts, there is a risk that small and isolated units (often disproportionately in HSS) will seem easy pickings for savings. What may be rational for an individual university (however undesirable from our point of view) may be less than optimal nationally or regionally if it leads to the disappearance of expertise or provision in a particular area. Our view is that a radical review of this policy is called for to deal with what could be a period of crisis. It is no longer simply about just languages and area studies and other traditionally vulnerable areas – it is a threat across the board.

Let me conclude by saying that while the immediate future looks distinctly unpromising, the Academy is in good shape to continue the long and difficult fight on behalf of the subjects we represent.

Notes

1 Vince Cable, speech at London South Bank University, 15 July 2010.

2 Professor Sir Peter Scott, Vice-Chancellor of Kingston University, 'A graduate tax is illogical: why not a tax on A-levels?', *Education Guardian*, 20 July 2010.

3 British Academy Forum on 'The economics of undergraduate tuition fees and maintenance support', www.britac.ac.uk/medialibrary/economics_of_tuition_fees_outputs.cfm

4 Steve Smith, 'Our universities are standing on the brink of catastrophe', *The Observer,* 13 June 2010. (The headline, as he has made clear, was not his.)

5 British Academy, 'Investing in Excellence: The Needs and Contribution of the UK Research Base', 16 July 2010, www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/367

6 Lord Rees of Ludlow and Professor Sir Adam Roberts, letter to Professor Adrian Smith, see www.britac.ac.uk/news/news.cfm/newsid/367