

The British Academy

2009-2013: reflections

ADAM ROBERTS

In these extracts from his address to the Annual General Meeting on 18 July 2013, the outgoing President of the British Academy, Professor Sir Adam Roberts, reflects on how the Academy has made progress on the objectives that he set for it four years ago.

NATIONAL ACADEMIES ARE CURIOUS BODIES. Their functions are not always obvious. A self-governing body of eminent academics may make claims to distinction, but what use is it to the wider world of scholarship, or indeed to society generally?

At the Annual General Meeting in July 2009, I identified specific priorities for my four-year term as President. These included: raising the profile of the Academy as a champion of humanities and social sciences; and engaging the expertise within the Fellowship with the wider world.¹ I believe we have made progress on these priorities.

Raising the Academy's profile

This first priority – raising the Academy's profile as champion of our subjects – was in some ways the trickiest. It involved taking public stances on major issues: not easy for a diverse group of scholars. It was important both to come up with clear points of view, which Council or the Officers could sign off, and to note the disclaimer that not every Fellow would agree with the view advanced, and was certainly not bound by it.

These four years have been a period of extraordinary uncertainty in higher education, with almost everything up for grabs: tuition fees, research assessment and funding, open access publication, immigration restrictions, language learning – the list is endless. We consulted widely and took an active part in all those debates. We were early in pressing the case for strengthening postgraduate funding.² Some wanted us to take an absolutist stance of rejecting particular policies outright. I sympathised, but we had to consider three questions. Was straightforward rejection actually justified in a particular case? Did we have a clear alternative? And how would the public perceive us if the British Academy, alone among the four major national academies, were to reject, say, the whole

idea of assessing the impact of research? In the end we often took positions which could not satisfy everyone, but which were, I believe, the appropriate ones for a national academy.

Throughout, we emphasised the importance of learning for its own sake. At the same time, we pointed out that there is in fact considerable evidence, of many different kinds, for the usefulness of our disciplines. We have consistently urged that it is more appropriate to focus on the public value of our subjects than to concentrate more narrowly on the impact of specific pieces of research.

There has been progress in recognition of the Academy's leadership in representing its disciplines: the most obvious is the formal invitation by two successive Directors-General for Knowledge and Innovation to submit evidence – on behalf of the humanities and social science communities throughout the country – for two successive Government Spending Reviews. So too there have been invitations to submit evidence to and appear before numerous parliamentary select committees. The Higher Education Funding Council for England has acknowledged the Academy's expertise in relation to vulnerable subjects. In the Open Access debate the Academy's lead has been noted, and influential (Figure 1).

The Academy has also sought to strengthen language and quantitative skills in UK education and research, with a particular focus on influencing the development of

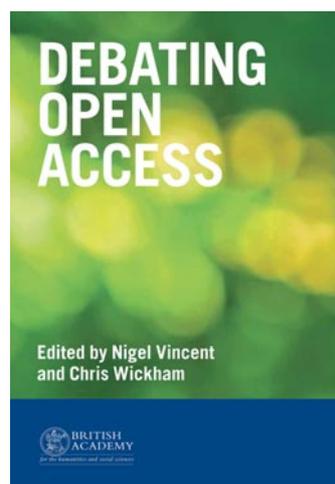


Figure 1. 'Debating Open Access', a collection of eight essays discussing the challenges of open access for the humanities and the social sciences, was published by the British Academy on 1 July 2013. The essays can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/openaccess

¹ Adam Roberts, 'Rising to the Challenge', *British Academy Review*, 14 (November 2009), 1-3. All the publications referenced in this article are available to be read via the Academy's website, www.britac.ac.uk

² 'Postgraduate funding: the neglected dimension', British Academy Position Statement (July 2012).

national policies and strategies. The Academy's leadership in this area has received strong support. For example, the Academy's position statement on the need for a national strategy to address the UK's quantitative skills deficit – 'Society Counts'³ – was accompanied by a supporting statement from 10 learned societies and subject associations.

In November 2012, the Academy held its first Language Week – a series of events, championing the use of languages in schools, universities, policymaking and public life.⁴ In the past year we have produced several excellent and very well received publications addressing the need to improve the teaching of languages.⁵ The Academy has now agreed a major new media partnership with the *Guardian* newspaper, to raise awareness of the importance of language learning and to inform educational policy and practice.

In the external consultations that we undertook as part of the development of the Academy's new *Strategic Framework* document (Figure 2), I was struck by the number of bodies that responded constructively – indicating support for our aspirations and a willingness to partner with us to help achieve them.

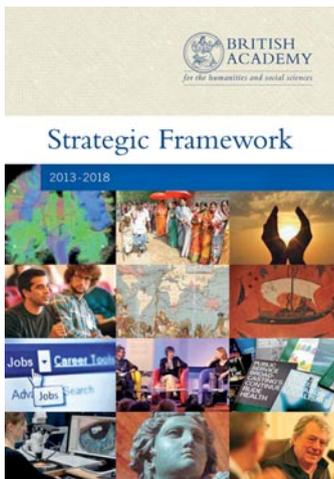


Figure 2. The text of the British Academy's 'Strategic Framework 2013-2018', adopted at the Annual General Meeting on 18 July 2013, can be found via www.britac.ac.uk/about

Throughout these four years I've never wavered from the belief that the British Academy must work as closely as possible with the other national academies – the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering, and the Academy of Medical Sciences. Our collaborations have covered everything from shared services to human enhancement. They have been particularly close, and beneficial, regarding the Government Spending Reviews of 2010 and 2013. This year the four academies drew up a shared case for maintaining UK research spending even at a time of general austerity; and on 6 June we jointly

presented that case to the Chancellor of the Exchequer at a meeting at number 11 Downing Street.

In the Chancellor's announcement of 26 June 2013 the government appears to have accepted the case: the cash level of research funding was maintained, much to the surprise of those who had predicted cuts. We do not yet know how the humanities and social sciences will fare in the sharing out of the cake – the detailed allocations of the science and research budget will not be known until September – but I am confident about the outcome.

Relations between a self-governing Academy and the government are by nature likely to be challenging. One of the many tricky issues we have had to confront was the invitation in 2011 to participate as a 'competent body' in assessing academic applicants for 'Tier 1' visa status. After much discussion in Council and elsewhere we agreed to do so. In making decisions about this we were not breaking wholly new ground. We have recently discovered in the archives that we performed a similar role in the Second World War. When many foreign nationals in the UK were held as detainees, the Academy established a committee to make recommendations to the Home Office 'regarding interned aliens of enemy nationality who possess special scientific or academic qualifications'. Very many were released under this scheme. We have a sheet listing 'Pevsner, N.' as one of the beneficiaries.⁶ Twenty-five years later Nikolaus Pevsner (author of the famous *Buildings of England* series) was to feature on another Academy list – this time of those to be elected as Fellows of the British Academy.

There has been much international recognition of the British Academy's roles: the European Commissioner for Research announcing at the Academy plans concerning the new EU funding programme;⁷ a renewed agreement with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences; an approach from the Indian government for advice on setting up an Academy for the Humanities and Social Sciences; and ongoing discussions with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for a conference in London next year on the value and role of the humanities and social sciences. We have also responded to requests for support from various academies that have faced the threat of unwelcome state control – most notably in Turkey and Russia.

Over the past four years we have strengthened the Academy's communications activities in many ways – building relationships with journalists, securing far more national press and broadcast coverage, developing new kinds of high profile public events to reach wider audiences, producing corporate publications, and redesigning the website. Increasing numbers of people visit the site, and the Academy's social media profile grows apace. (I did not imagine four years ago that I would be discussing the Academy and social media in the same sentence!)

³ 'Society Counts: Quantitative Skills in the Social Sciences and the Humanities', British Academy Position Statement (October 2012). See also page 6 of this issue for 'Stand Out and Be Counted'.

⁴ See 'British Academy Schools Language Awards 2012', *British Academy Review*, 21 (January 2013), 44-6.

⁵ *Languages: the State of the Nation. Demand and supply of language skills in the UK*, a report prepared by Teresa Tinsley (February 2013). See also page 6 of this issue for 'Talk the Talk'.

⁶ Letter dated 29 August 1940 from Sir F.G. Keynon, Secretary of the British Academy, to Sir Alexander Maxwell, Under Secretary of State, Home Office, reporting further recommendations made by the 'British Academy tribunal' for release from internment (BA 361). Pevsner is one of eight individuals listed as the highest priority – 'Persons whose contributions to learning are of the highest quality, and whose personal character is well vouched for'.

⁷ Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, 'The future of social sciences and humanities in Horizon 2020', *British Academy Review*, 19 (January 2012), 20-3.

Engaging the Fellowship's expertise

This second aim concerns what we call public policy: and it reflects the fact that our disciplines have much to give to inform and supply evidence for policymaking. Here I should distinguish *HE policy*, where the Academy is engaged and seeks to advance a point of view, to champion certain interests, from *public policy*, where we do not seek to take sides, are not politically partisan, and are not a lobbying organisation. Our role, like that of the other national academies, is to put forward, in a disinterested and authoritative way, what the major issues appear to be, what the evidence is, and what, if any, the consensus of researchers is.

The beginning of my presidency marked a new level of engagement in public policy activities, including the establishment in September 2009 of the Academy's Policy

Centre. Drawing on the expertise of our 900+ Fellows and other academics we have invited to take part, we have produced a series of reports on a wide range of public issues. These include UK voting systems,⁸ stress at work,⁹ and league tables.¹⁰ Our reports, and their favourable reception, prove that the idea that policy should be evidence-based is not dead.¹¹

There is of course much more to do. My successor, Nicholas Stern, will bring new ideas and energy to take the Academy forward. His renowned work on the environment is proof of the proposition that I have been pressing for four years: that none of the great problems that humankind faces can be successfully addressed without taking into account the contributions of the humanities and social sciences.



⁸ See Simon Hix, Ron Johnston and Iain McLean, 'How to Choose an Electoral System', *British Academy Review*, 15 (March 2010), 1-3.

⁹ See Tarani Chandola, 'The recession and stress at work', *British Academy Review*, 17 (March 2011), 4-5.

¹⁰ Beth Foley and Harvey Goldstein, *Measuring Success: League tables in the public sector* (March 2012). Also Harvey Goldstein, 'School league tables: A short guide for head teachers and governors' (January 2013).

¹¹ See also page 7 of this issue.



A drawing of Sir Adam Roberts, newly commissioned by the British Academy, was unveiled at the Annual General Meeting on 18 July 2013. The artist, Andrew Tift, visited Sir Adam at the Academy and took hundreds of photographs of him. Together they then selected the photograph from which the drawing would be made. The medium is charcoal, graphite, carbon, ink and etching tool on 300g paper. The artist took further photographs of the work in progress, some of which are reproduced on the facing page.