

An outstanding investment in what really matters

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In his address to the Annual General Meeting on 17 July 2014, Lord Stern of Brentford reflected on some of the achievements of the British Academy in the first year of his Presidency. This article is an edited version of that Presidential Address.

For me, the British Academy has two overarching goals: fostering excellence, by providing the resources, time and space to generate new research, with a special emphasis on supporting early-career scholars; and second, putting our subjects to work – showing what they can do. These twin goals are mutually supportive. We demonstrate, I hope confidently, that we are an outstanding investment – not just of public funds, but also for philanthropic sources – in what really matters, and in the future of the UK and the world more generally. In other words in making our case, we are the opposite of defensive. This year has been one of implementation. Let me illustrate what I mean through some recent examples.

Prospering Wisely

At the Annual General Meeting in July 2013, I said I believed that one of the great questions we face as a society – and as part of an increasingly interdependent world – is to understand what we mean by prosperity. In February 2014, the Academy offered a response to that question with *Prospering Wisely* (Figure 1). Using a booklet, videos and a specially created website, we set out to demonstrate how the humanities and social sciences can contribute both to an understanding of ‘prosperity’, and indeed to prosperity itself. It included video interviews with a range of Academy Fellows – a powerful way of going beyond assertion and showing argument and analysis at work. I think it illustrated practical ways in which we can see knowledge and insights from our disciplines feeding into our national life.

In the introduction to the *Prospering Wisely* booklet, I said that the humanities and social sciences ‘encompass all the elements that make for a good life and a healthy

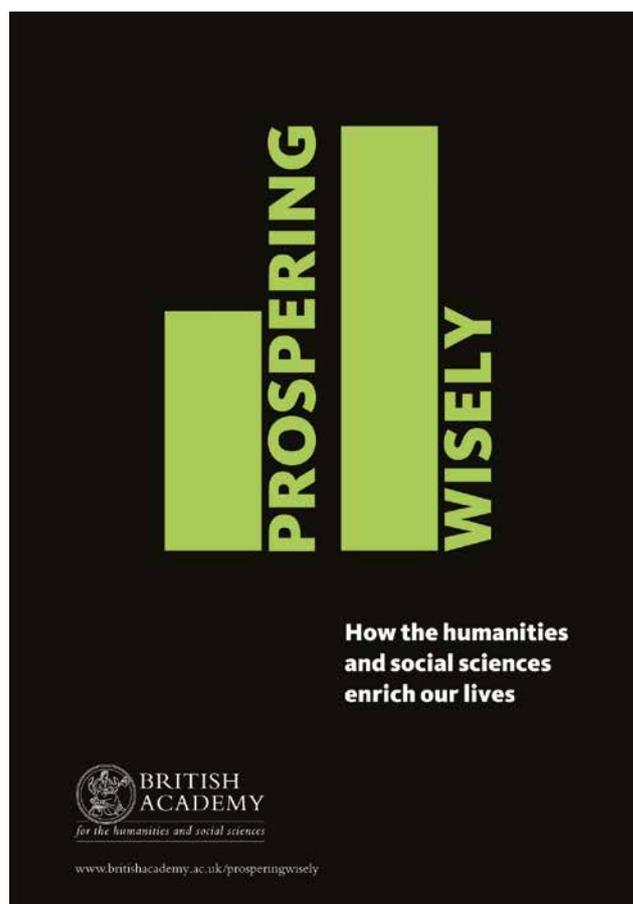


Figure 1
The *Prospering Wisely* booklet and website were launched on 12 February 2014 – together with Issue 23 of the *British Academy Review* which focused on the subject. More information is available via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely

society.’ This is in large measure why we do what we do, and why we believe it matters. We recognise, indeed celebrate, that our disciplines are valuable in themselves, that learning and scholarship are intrinsic goods. But we also understand the contribution they make as vital drivers of human progress. They provide the rigorous scrutiny and insights, the ideas and the long-term



Figure 2

Lord Nicholas Stern (right) introduces the first of the British Academy Debates on the subject of Ageing, in London on 26 February 2014. The panel that discussed the issue of 'Benefit or Burden? Coming to terms with ageing Britain' was made up of Bronwen Maddox, Professor Julia Twigg, Evan Davies (chair), Professor Sir John Hills FBA and Professor Alan Walker FBA. To watch video recordings of the three Debates on Ageing, or to download a booklet summarising the arguments, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/ageing

thinking that can – and do – have a profound influence on our social and cultural well-being, on the communities we live in and on our place and reputation in the world. And sometimes we provide the critical assessments and dissent which are vital to democracy and to intellectual progress. I think we would all sign up to the idea that a society without thriving social sciences and humanities risks achieving at best only an arid kind of prosperity, far less rich than our creative human culture deserves – and at worst confusion, apathy, decline and conflict.

The Academy will continue to represent and speak for the interests of the community of scholarship which makes all these contributions possible, and which often feels threatened, unloved and vulnerable.

The British Academy's Fellows embody and represent the very best of academic life in the humanities and social sciences. We focus, rightly, on excellence, as we must. But we must never forget that this excellence rests on the fact that our disciplines are taught and researched by more than 60,000 academic staff across the UK, and studied each year by around one million UK undergraduates, 60 per cent of all postgraduates and some 250,000 – indeed the majority of – international students. That academic system not only contributes to all those non-financial aspects that make for prosperity; it also delivers the academic excellence which is a crucial comparative advantage of the UK and thereby delivers substantial wealth into the UK economy. The academic excellence and strength of our universities and research must surely be at the top of the list of the attractions and competitiveness of the UK. We will carry on making that case.

The British Academy Debates

This brings me to the British Academy Debates. The experiment in staging large-scale public discussions around the country which could demonstrate the humanities and social sciences 'at work' can, I think, be regarded as a success. The idea is that through grouped series of events we examine and illuminate some of today's most difficult questions and toughest human and policy challenges. In the first series of Debates, leading

academics and other public figures discussed some of the key opportunities and challenges posed by the ageing population, highlighting key issues and research results, and along the way demolishing some popular nostrums or stereotypes. The events attracted substantial audiences in London, Sheffield and Edinburgh (Figure 2), with many more watching the online recordings. I also took part in an extra 'spin-off' event on Ageing at the Hay Festival in May, where the Academy has now established an annual presence.¹

I believe we need these Debates for two reasons. First, because of the sheer scale, complexity and urgency of the challenges we are facing, as societies, as economies, and as individuals. The UK faces enormous pressures in the years ahead – economically, politically, socially, constitutionally – including tough decisions for public spending.

Second, it is part of the Academy's duty and strategy to help more people not only to understand these issues better but also to understand that these are areas where the humanities and social sciences provide deep insights and great public value. Research, scholarship and expertise in our disciplines illuminate human dilemmas and explain how economies, cultures and communities function. They help make the complex intelligible, and help us understand human values and possibilities. And in so doing, they often force ethical issues and choices into the open and broaden the understanding of alternatives.

The British Academy Debates have shown – and will show – that we can make an important contribution to discussion of these challenges. They can help provide a new kind of national conversation. Further series of Debates have now been planned and will focus on 'Immigration' (in autumn 2014, in Birmingham, Liverpool and London)² and on 'Well-being and Public Policy' (in early 2015, in Manchester, Cardiff and London). We are also considering ways to ensure that subsequent series can involve and build on more of the expertise from across the Academy – its Fellows, its

1. See pages 4-9 of this issue for 'The British Academy on Ageing' and '10 quick questions about processing speed'.

2. More information can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/immigration

funded research, its policy outputs and its international work. Like *Prospering Wisely*, the Debates are a way of helping to create an intellectual atmosphere where, by showing our subjects at work, we will advance the recognition of our disciplines in our national life.

Working shoulder-to-shoulder with our fellow academies

Let me emphasise that nothing I am saying about working to ensure that the public value of the humanities and social sciences is better understood should be taken as implying any kind of false competitiveness with science, technology, engineering and medicine. They are intertwined and mutually supportive. Science, engineering and medicine are vital drivers of human progress and we must celebrate and nurture them. We stand shoulder-to-shoulder with our fellow national academies – the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and the Academy of Medical Sciences – in delivering a shared narrative on the importance of all parts of this country’s research and science base. Last year the academies’ joint document, *Fuelling Prosperity*, made a powerful case to the Government for continued investment in all areas of academic research in order for the UK to keep pace with its international competitors.³ We cannot afford to lose our hard-won reputation as a beacon for world-class research.

The kind of economy the UK now has, and shares with more and more of the developed world, depends on the creativity, knowledge and skills that come from social science and the humanities, just as it needs capital resources and equipment. This ‘fuel’ helps achieve growth that can renew and adapt – by driving innovation, by challenging, questioning and by offering up new ideas. More than three-quarters of the UK economy is now in services, with a constant need for people with knowledge and skills in critical analysis, problem solving, negotiation and communication, teaching and listening, speaking other languages. These are the very skills that training in the humanities and social sciences provide.

We also have a duty to speak out on matters of vital importance to research excellence, particularly where others may feel inhibited. A couple of weeks ago, I and other national academy Presidents wrote to newspapers to express our shared concerns at the lack of attention being paid in the debate over the Scottish independence referendum to the impact that separation could have on Scotland’s outstanding research base, and indeed that of the rest of the UK. We were not taking a position and saying vote no; but we were drawing attention, on behalf of our various disciplines, to a crucial issue that has been too little aired.⁴

3. *Fuelling prosperity: Research and innovation as drivers of UK growth and competitiveness*, 22 April 2013.

4. The British Academy, in collaboration with the Royal Society of Edinburgh, has also sought to shed light on the more general issues surrounding the referendum on Scottish independence: see page 16 of this issue for ‘The British Academy on Scotland’.

5. See pages 13-15 of this issue for ‘Global power, influence and perception in the 21st century’.



Figure 3
Lord Stern visits the British Institute in Amman in June 2014. It is one of two research institutes operated by the Council for British Research in the Levant, which is supported financially by the British Academy.

International partnerships

Our international partnerships are of vital importance. Ideas should have no national boundaries and we live in an ever more connected world. There are many examples, but let me mention two from the world’s largest economies. In China we had a very productive workshop with the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing on international economic policy and governance. And in June 2014 we had a fascinating discussion here in London with the American Academy of Arts & Sciences on prosperity and on ‘soft power’.⁵ I also had the opportunity in June to visit the British Academy Institute in Jordan (Figure 3): most of our institutes are concentrated around the Mediterranean and the Middle East, and have a vital contribution to make in the understanding of the culture, history, politics, economics and life of a region of vital importance to the world.

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So, it has been a good year for the British Academy and it is in rude health. I personally have enjoyed my first year as President. And whilst I am keenly aware of the challenges and difficulties that lie ahead, I believe we have the strategy to take the Academy onwards and upwards.