

The President's 2014 AGM speech 17 July 2014

The Annual General Meeting is an opportunity to do two things: first, to reflect on the year behind us; second, to look ahead. Robin has given us a splendid *tour d'horizon* of some of the high points of the past 12 months – not many low points, because I hope you'll all agree that the Academy's had a good year! And Mike has summarised another largely successful financial year. I'll add a few thoughts of my own, focusing on what I see as the current and future priorities, as well as challenges, that lie ahead for us.

For me, the 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 implementation. Let me illustrate what I mean through some recent examples.

1. *Prospering Wisely – and how the humanities and social sciences can contribute*

At last July's AGM I said I believed that one of the greatest questions we face as a society – and as part of an increasingly interdependent world – is to understand what we mean by prosperity. In February the Academy offered a response to that question with *Prospering Wisely*. 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.

As I said in my introduction to the *Prospering Wisely* booklet, the humanities and social sciences 'encompass all the elements that make for a good life and a healthy 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 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 – perhaps more often these days – 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.

2. *The BA Debates - helping to understand and tackle today's great challenges*

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 steadily ageing population, highlight key issues and research results, and along the way demolish some popular nostrums or stereotypes. The events attracted substantial audiences in London, Sheffield and Edinburgh, 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.

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 (this coming autumn in Birmingham, Liverpool and London) 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 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.

3. *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. 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. 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 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 governance. And in June we had a fascinating discussion here in London with the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on prosperity and on 'soft power'. I also had the opportunity in June to visit the British Academy Institute in Jordan – our institutes are concentrated around the Mediterranean 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.

Looking ahead

I want to conclude by focusing more squarely on the future. In recent weeks we have had the positive news that the Academy's Government funding for next year (2015/16) has been secured. Within that further flat cash grant of £27m there are several pieces of good news. The first is that a formal allocation for Small Research Grants has been secured. I'm sure no-one here today needs convincing either of the scheme's tremendous effectiveness nor the value which our wider academic community attaches to it. Second, we now have a built-in allocation for the Academy's work on Languages and Quantitative Skills, meaning that the many initiatives that resource has spawned, especially the public impact we have had with Languages, can continue with secure mainstreamed funding. And finally, the Academy's allocation does not require a further cut in our operating costs; over the four previous years we have been required to reduce these costs by 5% each year. And let us remember that flat cash is falling in value in real terms.

That leads me to the first of several votes of thanks. At a time of major assault on all areas of public spending, our newly departed Minister for Universities and Science, David Willetts, helped provide not only flat cash but also a vital ringfence for science and research funding. Beyond that, he has been a stout defender of the humanities and social sciences, and a notable and regular presence here at the Academy and at many of our centres of learning.

We welcome his successor Greg Clark, a universities Minister with a PhD is no bad thing, indeed if you forgive me, from the LSE. Of course that does not mean that there is any room for complacency. We have an Election on the horizon and what promises to be a tough

Comprehensive Spending Review, whichever government emerges as the victor. We already know that the next Government will be hunting across the entire raft of public expenditure for further savings. We have a duty to speak up.

This tough external financial climate has two consequences. It is a further reminder of the importance of the Academy maintaining public support by continuing to demonstrate the importance and value of its disciplines at work. Second, it is a reminder of the continuing priority for the Academy to strengthen its fundraising and income diversification.

I should like to thank our major donors, including the Leverhulme Trust and the Wolfson Foundation, for their support over the past year, and the Leverhulme for their recent pledge of a further £500,000 a year to support Small Research Grants. I also want to thank the great many Fellows who continue to make generous donations each year to the Academy, and also the growing number considering making legacy contributions. The support and commitment of our Fellows is not only vital for its own sake but also in showing potential donors that we are a strong community.

Over the past year the Academy has conducted a review of its fundraising activities and appointed a new Development Director. The Review concluded that there is significant potential to develop fundraising further, and the new case for support we have created offers donors an ambitious programme entitled 'Excellence for the Future'. This will include providing greater opportunities for and investing in younger academics, building on and extending our own cohort of Postdoctoral Fellows, and seeking ways to reach younger audiences, including those at school. And it will take farther our initiatives in public engagement. We invest in the future, and our future support, by bringing on the rising talents and showing what our disciplines can offer.

So, it has been a good year for the 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.

Close

I want to close with my vote of thanks to the elected Officers, members of Council, Committee members and other Fellows for their *pro bono* work in support of the Academy over the past year. We could not exist without this – and indeed we have calculated the totality of this *pro bono* work at amounting to some 30,000 hours each year. I also want particularly to thank those coming to the end of their terms of office as Section chairs and Council members. And four Officers whose terms have come to an end – Professors Jonathan Bate, Martin Millett, Nigel Vincent and Chris Wickham. And I want to thank very warmly of the Academy’s hard-working staff for another exceptional year of progress in a year where external pressure has been strong and new initiatives numerous. In our attempt to replace the irreplaceable, we have made a very good appointment as the new Chief Executive from next summer, of Alun Evans currently Head of the Scotland Office.

Finally I must make special mention of the leadership of Robin Jackson – his CBE in the New Year’s Honours reflects an extraordinary contribution to scholarship and the nation through his work at the Academy. His term comes to an end next year after nine years at the helm of the Academy. I have learned enormously from him and depend on him. And I look forward to his continued and strong leadership next year. There will be an appropriate moment in 2015 to thank him formally for his dedicated - and what I think everyone in the room will agree has been transformational – management.

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