



THE ONE HUNDRED AND NINTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 21 July 2011

President's address: "Interesting Times"

The ancient Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times", is almost certainly a twentieth century Western invention, but, like many fictions, it expresses a deep truth. These are indeed interesting times, and whether they are a blessing or a curse is a question which lurks in all that I have to say. I will touch on some difficult issues: please feel free to pursue them in the discussion period following these remarks.

OBJECTIVES 2009

Two years ago, in my first Address as President, I identified various objectives:

- Raising the profile of the Academy;
- Greater engagement with issues of the day;
- The need for a larger and better auditorium, and fundraising to achieve it.

We can now see real progress on all three.

Raised profile

Probably the most significant recognition of the increased standing of the Academy was the invitation from the government's Director-General of Science and Research, Sir Adrian Smith, to give high-level advice on the needs of the research community in preparation for the government's Spending Review. We were one of only 6 national bodies invited for the purpose. Our highest priority, following consultation with Fellows and the community, was maintenance of university block funding for research (Quality Related, or QR, funding, based on research assessment) which is flexible (unlike much research council or other project funding) and disproportionately vital for our disciplines. We also argued for maintenance of the share of funding for the humanities and social science research councils. As you have heard from the Chief Executive and Secretary's report, we were successful in this, and in maintaining the Academy's own funding, although we lost one of our most important schemes – a subject to which I shall return.

Our raised profile has many aspects. As President I am now a member *ex officio* of the Council for Science and Technology, the Prime Minister's advisory body on science and research policy. The Foreign Secretary is a member of the government's Global Science and Innovation Framework group, which advises on international research policy. The other

academies have long been members of these groups; but there is now a seat at the table for this Academy.

What this means is that the Academy is now regularly regarded as the national body that represents and speaks for the humanities and social sciences. This greater influence can be helpful to our cause: whether it is the Higher Education Funding Council considering its policy on vulnerable subjects, or a Select Committee looking for informed input, the Academy is seen as the place to turn. When the Minister opted to make a speech on government policy concerning our subjects, it was natural for him to do so at the Academy (and in this auditorium).

Greater engagement

Our greater engagement with the issues of the day – both those which affect the humanities and social sciences, and those where research can illuminate topical policy concerns - is symbolised by the Academy's Policy Centre. The Centre, created less than two years ago, is now well established, producing influential work on topics ranging from constituency reform to cultural heritage, from the implications of austerity to the history of family structures.

Less conspicuous, but no less important, are our British Academy Forums. These Chatham House style discussions involving policymakers, academic experts and journalists now take place monthly, and have covered topics from libel law reform to social mobility, from cultural heritage to constitutional change.

The Academy's engagement with issues of the day is also manifested in the increasing tendency to work with partners – including the Royal Society (with whose President I wrote a joint letter at a crucial juncture during the Spending Review); the research councils (for events and as supporters of the Policy Centre); HEFCE, Universities UK, the British Council, the Institute of English Studies (partners in a second successful Literature Week); and the National Trust, English Heritage, various publishers and universities. Last night for example we held an event in partnership with Cambridge discussing threats to the humanities.

Auditorium

It is pleasing indeed to be holding this AGM in the new Wolfson Auditorium. The Chief Executive and Secretary has spoken of the Number 11 project: it has transformed what we can do as an Academy, what we can offer our community, and how we can generate income. The holding of events – lectures, workshops, and conferences – is at the heart of the work of an Academy: our previous cramped lecture hall was increasingly ill-suited to our aspirations.

I must thank Fellows for your most generous response to my appeal for your support. Over 350 of you helped make the project succeed, and without dipping into our endowment. Indeed some 40% of the Fellowship made a philanthropic contribution of some form to the Academy last year. If I may, I would single out the generous donation by Professor Ray

Pahl, now sadly deceased, of a number of canvases from his outstanding collection of modern British art.

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

Now let me turn to the external context. We are in a period of exceptional turbulence – interesting times indeed – with changes in teaching funding and tuition fees in England and predicted cuts and changes elsewhere, a strict new visa regime for students and staff, new methods and criteria for research evaluation. Following the white paper on higher education, published last month, we can also look forward (if that is the word) to a new regulatory framework for higher education. And all this comes on top of sharp cuts in teaching funding, which are only now being digested.

Higher Education in the UK is hugely successful in attracting students and staff from around the world, and is one of our most thriving sectors. The quality of research is second only to the USA, indeed, comparable to it if you take our smaller population base into account; the system is efficient; and student satisfaction is high. We may have reservations about league tables, but they show consistently that the UK comes second to the USA in institutions in the top 50 or top 100 in nearly every category. And they also show (I note with interest) that in humanities and social science, UK universities have a higher position in the league tables than they do for other subjects.

So why are universities being subjected to such dramatic changes? The pressures for change have been building up for a long time. It was the previous government that introduced cuts in the teaching grant, and set up the Browne Review. The underfunding of graduate studies for UK students goes back decades.

The 2011 White Paper on Higher Education

The present government says that the changes now envisaged will put student choice at the heart of the system, improve teaching quality, and avoid funding cuts that are affecting other parts of the public sector. But there are surely huge risks in the scale and pace of change proposed, and it is not surprising that the White Paper published last month has had a very mixed reception. One disappointment is that the White Paper does not set out a clear and ambitious vision for Higher Education, nor look ahead to the longer term. Its focus is on pressing issues around funding structures and attempts to increase competition in undergraduate courses.

It used to be the case that a white paper appeared first, laying out a vision and issues and options, to be followed by radical changes. Here, however, it looks as if we have had the radical decisions first, driven by financial pressure, with a white paper appearing subsequently in an attempt to address issues that have arisen from the changes. And along the way the big picture has perhaps been lost from sight.

It is tempting – but in my view too many have succumbed too easily – to see disaster in the simple fact that humanities and social sciences are to lose their direct teaching funding from next year. In the first place it is not just these subjects – for so are subjects such as maths and

computer science. Indeed, these changes apply to all disciplines. Every subject is losing its core subsidy, with direct funding from HEFCE only remaining for courses with high costs (e.g. laboratory or clinical).

Actually, this is the wrong way to express the change. Universities are not losing funding; rather it is being delivered via a different route. Of course, the direct grant provided stability, and there is a risk that the new student-led system will be more volatile, but the government has been at pains to state that there will be a cash increase of around 10% in Higher Education funding by 2014-15.

The majority of humanities and social science courses, which previously were receiving per student some £6,000 - £7,000 in annual funding and tuition fees, will now be able to charge up to £9,000 a year. 47 out of 123 universities were given permission by the Office for Fair Access last week to charge the maximum fee in 2012-13. Many of these are leading institutions in our disciplines. There will, I suspect, be cost pressures on the most expensive areas of science and engineering, where margins will remain very tight. Provided student demand keeps up (and there were 200,000 unsuccessful applicants last year), humanities and social science courses will be more profitable than others, and increasingly desirable as offerings.

The decision to lift the cap on numbers for students possessing AAB results at A level (or equivalent) may also favour our subjects. According to HESA data, in 2009-10 25% of entrants studying humanities and social science at university had grades of AAB+ or equivalent, compared to 17% of students studying STEM subjects and 16% of total entrants.

However, there remain serious implications for students, universities, disciplines and society as a whole. The White Paper has been criticised as missing an opportunity to lighten the burden of accountability. And of course, change always brings with it uncertainty. Will the new system keep UK Higher Education at the international leading edge? What will be the impact on student demand? Will there be increased demand for some courses at the expense of others? Will "student choice" improve quality? Will it undermine academic authority (for example, leading to grade inflation as students and institutions seek to ensure everyone gets the maximum outcome for their investment)? Will access to our disciplines be narrowed? There are many questions to which we do not know the answers, and it is natural for many to have concerns.

A particular area of concern relates to subjects, perhaps especially languages, which are often small and vulnerable. How will they fare in the new system? It is highly possible that a market-led system will put them under further pressure. Hence the importance of SIVS - "strategically important and vulnerable subjects", whose health HEFCE has been asked to attend to. HEFCE has already sought our advice to help develop its thinking on this vital policy. Our input emphasized the need for robust systems to monitor developments and take early action to address emerging problems; and for ensuring that individual decisions taken by universities to close or reshape academic departments do not collectively damage the provision of disciplines that are essential for national purposes. We noted particular concerns around modern foreign languages, area studies and quantitative skills. Our

repeated calls for action to support these areas led to us receiving earmarked funding for our own new programme of Languages and Quantitative Skills, and we will continue to encourage HEFCE, and other bodies such as the research councils, to assist in the maintenance of crucial provision – which, once lost, is very hard to recover.

A recent YouGov survey shows that parents and pupils do not understand the new system of financing higher education and what these changes will mean to them. Addressing this issue is vital for universities and for disciplines and their representative groups. The Academy remains committed to promoting the importance of the disciplines we represent, and we plan to work with partners to make the case. We have to recognise that this new system means that we have to be more proactive in making the case for our respective disciplines.

Postgraduate and research

The White Paper promises a further white paper later this year on research and innovation. Once again discussion of the postgraduate arrangements has been postponed, just as the Browne Review dodged the issue. This is dangerous, for we must take care to maintain the supply of postgraduates and address their need for support. This is something I have raised on previous occasions. It worries me that I have to keep re-stating it. We must ensure that the new system does not unintentionally act as a deterrent to postgraduate study. I therefore welcome the call to HEFCE to monitor the situation. But I doubt that monitoring will go far enough.

Graduating with a larger amount of debt from undergraduate study may put off the next generation of postgraduates, especially the less well-off. Far too little attention has been paid by government to this potential threat. It is true that repayment of undergraduate loans is deferred until an individual reaches a certain level of income. But many students graduating with combined tuition and maintenance debts of as much as £40,000 after three years – roughly twice current levels – are going to pause before embarking on even one, let alone three or four further years of study. As things stand, these further debts will not be supported by any kind of state subsidy. I urged the Minister in February to look seriously into this issue, and will take every opportunity to remind him of it. Professor Adrian Smith's panel has been reconvened to examine the potential impact on postgraduate study (and so careers) of the changes to undergraduate funding. If this issue is not satisfactorily addressed, the future renewal of the academic profession could be seriously put at risk.

Nor must we forget the essential link between teaching and research. "Student choice" may serve to balance the way that the RAE and other developments in recent years have encouraged all universities to focus on research. For some universities to refocus on teaching is healthy. My concern is the impact of changes to the funding of teaching on the health and international quality of research, and the UK's ability to attract UK nationals into an academic career. At the very least it should mean that adequate resource is found for postgraduate studentships and postdoctoral fellowships.

In the meantime, the various funding bodies' Research Excellence Framework team will be publishing proposals on panel criteria and working methods for the 2014 assessment exercise at the end of this month. We will examine these proposals carefully. We have already influenced thinking - an increased number of sub-panels in our disciplines being one example. HEFCE has asked us to host a consultation event in September to discuss the criteria and working methods. We continue to keep a wary eye on the assessment of impact. The Academy's input helped to bring the proposed level down to 20% (we argued for less, and would have preferred 15%), and now the focus is on the way that the various panels will approach their task. We must ensure that the arrangements are appropriate for the discipline in question.

General

These radical changes come at a time of anxiety in our community. In part it is an objection felt by many to a market-led system for funding higher education, with concerns for student debt or the social composition of young people studying our disciplines. Some are worried that our disciplines are not seen as "strategic" (citing the Browne Review) - and fear that Vice-Chancellors are waiting to seize the opportunity to close Humanities and Social Science provision. Some are worried that government has a fascination with technology and innovation, as argued by our Corresponding Fellow, Professor Martha Nussbaum in her book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*, on which she gave us a lively talk in December. Some see the arrival of "impact", and a general climate of measurement, citations, etc., as inimical to humane learning. Some see the balance between the lone scholar and team-working, or between undirected and directed research funding, as shifting undesirably. Some see cuts to funding for cultural bodies - museums, galleries, libraries - as undermining scholarship. Some see the ending of support for our own Small Research Grants as an invasion of our autonomy, or at least of a failure by government to see the value of a scheme particularly suited to the humanities and social sciences.

While all these concerns are well founded, a key fact must be acknowledged: in its major funding decisions on Higher Education, the current government has not shown prejudice against our disciplines. Humanities and social sciences research did well (indeed unexpectedly well) in the Spending Review, emerging at least as strongly as the sciences. In its teaching funding policy, the government has not sought to distinguish subjects into those that are strategic and those that are less so. It is even possible, as I have suggested, that in the new system humanities and social sciences might actually fare better than under the old. Our subjects have an inherent appeal to students and will equip them for the world and economy they face. Research is of excellent quality.

Let me conclude by saying that while we live in times characterised by that purportedly Chinese curse, I remain even more confident than before that this Academy will go from strength to strength, and will continue to make the case for the value of the subjects that it exists to support and champion.

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