



BRITISH  
ACADEMY

THE ONE HUNDRED AND TENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 19 July 2012

## **President's address: 'The Academy and the World'**

This has been an extremely busy year for the Academy. Robin Jackson, in his address as Chief Executive & Secretary, has covered much of the waterfront. In these remarks I want to:

- summarise some of the policy issues that have faced the Academy;
- say something about its international role; and
- express my heartfelt thanks to a number of colleagues.

### ***1. Policy issues facing the Academy***

As I wrote in the *Annual Report*, at a time of continued turbulence in higher education this Academy has been active, defending the interests of the humanities and social sciences and championing their value. That is our central role. A planned new series of Higher Education Perspectives will I believe strengthen that role. We are discussing, for example, the publication of a comparison of the strengths of the Higher Education systems in the UK and in the USA, which will serve to correct often simplistic assumptions about the superiority of the American model.

We have recently been having much discussion of whether the Academy needs a strapline to put on its public communications – if only to distinguish ourselves from the British Academy Film Awards and such-like. I favour keeping it simple: 'for the Humanities and Social Sciences': and those six words are, perhaps unsurprisingly, the main theme of my remarks today.

In the past 12 months, the June 2011 White Paper on Higher Education in England, about which I was somewhat unenthusiastic in my AGM address last year, has continued to attract criticism. Many of the issues we have faced in the past year are fall-out from the White Paper. And some others are hardy perennials: for example, the Academy has continued to keep a wary eye on preparations for the forthcoming Research Excellence Framework, due to take place in 2014.

## Subjects under pressure

A key concern shaping our work this year has been that a system driven overwhelmingly by student choice is likely to put certain subjects under pressure – subjects which are valuable on academic and long-term grounds but may not have an immediately visible vocational application. These subjects include, but are not restricted to, languages and area studies. The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) approached the Academy for advice on the development of its policy in this area. Although I remain convinced that in the longer term the humanities and social sciences will continue to flourish, action may be needed to protect vulnerable pockets of valuable provision.

The data on university entry in 2012 strengthen these concerns, particularly in relation to foreign language study. In response to the data, in a letter to *The Times* I called for a return to mandatory foreign language study until age 16. The Academy also released an influential position statement on *The Year Abroad*, an important feature of the study of foreign languages.

A rich and diverse programme of activity is being taken forward through the Academy's Language and Quantitative Skills Programme, now in its second year. Here I draw particular attention to the Academy's Inquiry – entitled *Lost for Words* – into the need for languages in UK public policy, examining how well existing language capacity is being used for public policy purposes, including the needs of different branches of government and other sectors.

## Postgraduate study

Although the government's policies represented a major change, they failed to address postgraduate studies and the training of future generations of academics. The Academy was early in identifying the likely consequences of raised undergraduate student fees for postgraduate education, and released a position statement outlining the issues and possible steps to address them.

Postgraduate study is under threat from a number of quarters, ranging from increased levels of undergraduate debt; rising postgraduate tuition fees; the shortage of postgraduate funding opportunities; and current immigration policy, to which I will return in a moment.

Given how postgraduate study is vital to the future health of our universities and research – the postgraduate students of today are the university teachers and researchers of tomorrow – it is shocking that the question of how postgraduate study should be funded in the future, particularly as regards English students, has been largely ignored. The Academy's position statement on *Postgraduate Funding: The Neglected Dimension*, published earlier this month, sought to address this omission, calling on government to develop a holistic strategy for higher education and

research that recognises the value of postgraduate study to the UK. While recognizing that universities themselves need to tackle this issue, including by making it a focus of fundraising, we also call for the development of a government-backed postgraduate loan system to sit alongside the new funding system for undergraduate study.

In the coming months, the Academy will continue to draw attention to the importance of postgraduate study and the need to develop a coherent strategy with regard to it.

### **Open access publishing**

This week we have seen announcements about proposed open-access publication. In principle it is an excellent thing that research which is publicly funded should be accessible to the public, and not hidden behind an expensive payment barrier – especially at a time when library funds are under pressure and subscriptions to journals are in decline. But what concerns me is that the approach proposed is based on a science model, where research is grant-funded and published in specialist journals. There are troubling implications for some traditional models of publication, particularly in the humanities: not least as regards the place of monographs and collections of essays. We need to be alert lest a scheme based on the needs of the physical sciences is imposed on the social sciences and the humanities, where it may be less appropriate. I know that this issue is of concern to many Fellows. The Management Advisory Committee (MAC) will be considering this matter at its meeting tomorrow.

### **The future funding of research**

What is the British Academy doing to make the case for continued investment in research?

The UK currently invests much less in research and development than many of its leading competitors. Public funds for research have been held steady in cash terms, but are falling in real terms. Many of our competitors – for example, the US and Germany – have responded to the global economic downturn by providing financial stimulus packages for research and development. The US is doubling its basic science spending to 2016, with a 6% increase last year; Germany is spending an additional £15bn on science, research and development in the five year period to 2015. Growth in China and India is remarkable. These increases may make these countries more attractive destinations for researchers in the future. They also create new opportunities for stronger interactions and exchange.

For the last Spending Review in 2010, the British Academy worked with the three other national academies (the Royal Society, the Royal Academy of Engineering and

the Academy of Medical Sciences) to make the case for the importance of research. Our united front helped achieve as good a settlement as we could have hoped for, given the economic circumstances.

As part of their preparations for the next Spending Review, I am pleased to say that all four bodies have agreed to work together once more. Only last week, I took part in a joint event organised by the four national academies to discuss how research in the UK is a huge national asset, and a major contributor to economic, social and cultural well-being – it is a sign of the times that the economic dimension dominates debate. The topic was particularly apt, as Dr Vince Cable MP, Secretary of State for Business, Innovation and Skills, was one of the event's main speakers. In the opening address at this meeting I made a familiar enough point that bears repetition: 'The insights from the full range of disciplines (from science, medicine and engineering right through to the social sciences and humanities) are needed if we are to address the major challenges facing us today – economic, social and cultural.'

## *2. International*

I want to turn now to international issues. Although my field is International Relations, I have as President been mainly concerned with what might be called domestic issues – matters within this country and sometimes even within this building. I have consciously eschewed what one might call an exclusively 'twin towns' approach to relations focused on academies overseas. Indeed, I have yet to visit an overseas academy except in the context of going to the country under independent auspices to give a lecture or attend a conference in my field. As it happens, there are valuable joint workshops coming up with academies in China and in Australia, but there is more to our international outlook than simple exchanges.

Scholarship and research have always been international endeavours. Indeed, it was an international context that catalysed the foundation of the British Academy. It was created after a meeting in Germany in 1899, establishing the International Association of Scientific and Literary Academies. The meeting noted that, while the Royal Society represented Great Britain in 'Natural Science', there was no equivalent institution to represent literary or humane fields of learning. Two years later, the British Academy was established, and it has since gone on to embrace the social sciences as they developed in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Frederic G. Kenyon, *The British Academy: The First Fifty Years 1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp. 5–8; and Mortimer Wheeler, *The British Academy 1949–1968* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 1.

Today the international dimension of the Academy's work is as important as ever. The Academy has a notable international presence. Much Humanities and Social Science research has an international dimension, helping us to understand the world around us and to address many of the challenges facing us, which are increasingly global in nature. For example, a recent snapshot of our UK-based Fellows found that 92 of them (over 10% of the Fellowship) had interests in Africa or Asia. And, of course, the Academy is fortunate in having, in its Corresponding Fellowship, a strong element from overseas. I am delighted to see that Corresponding Fellows are playing a fuller part in the life of the Academy, contributing assessments of scholars under consideration for election, attending meetings and giving talks.

How can the UK, and this Academy in particular, contribute to sustaining the global standing of research?

### **Strengths**

The starting point should properly be recognition of the strength of UK humanities and social science teaching and research. I will mention three factors:

- (1) The international standing of research in our disciplines. The *Times Higher* league tables, to cite only one source, show a larger number of UK institutions in the top 100 worldwide for humanities and social science than tables for other subjects.
- (2) The ability to attract the most talented researchers from home and from overseas and to support them throughout their careers.
- (3) The capacity to attract excellent students, undergraduate and postgraduate, from all over the world. The majority of overseas students in the UK are studying our disciplines - contributing to the health of our universities and our economy.

### **Risks: barriers to researcher and student mobility**

At the same time we face risks. I should mention briefly the risk, highlighted in some recent newspaper reports, that UK universities, in their recruiting of non-EU students, may be lowering their standards and treat foreigners preferentially. There is a strong collective interest in ensuring that this does not happen.

Much the most immediate and serious concern relates to barriers to researcher and student mobility. The Academy is concerned that the government's current immigration policies - and the perception thereof, which is a serious problem in itself - are having a potentially damaging impact on the free flow of academic interchange and the ability of the UK to recruit the most talented overseas researchers and students.

The Academy has repeatedly called for action to be taken to address the perception that the UK is ‘closed for business’ as regards a wide range of academic exchanges. In our most recent call – on *Postgraduate Funding* – the Academy drew attention to the damage that might occur to the supply of students from overseas, resulting from the government’s current student visa requirements. The government’s own risk assessment, undertaken last year, estimated that over four years the policy could cost the UK (in a worst-case scenario) £3.6 billion, including the loss of student tuition fees to universities and other direct, as well as indirect, financial costs.<sup>2</sup> Even if, like all worst-case scenarios, this is overstated, it is surely folly that such obstacles have been placed in the way of UK higher education’s capacity to attract overseas students and academics. Apart from anything else, UK higher education is one of the most successful and effective sectors of our economy and national life – and one which unlike the banks and much of the city, has managed to keep its hard-earned reputation reasonably intact when all around are losing theirs in a morass of recession compounded by scandal.

So I repeat here the call the British Academy made earlier this month that the immigration policy for overseas university students should be changed – overseas university students must be removed from the net migration statistics. They are a separate and distinct category and should be recognized as such.

### **The Academy’s international leadership**

Under the leadership of the Academy’s Foreign Secretary (Dame Helen Wallace) and the Vice-President for BASIS (Professor Martin Millett), the Academy has been able to build on its long history of support for international collaboration. Examples of its funding and activities include:

- (1) Financial support for overseas schools and institutes – known as BASIS – which became more or less regularized in 1950, as one of the first acts in the reforming presidency of Sir Charles Webster.<sup>3</sup> This support is as important today as it was then. The Academy-sponsored schools and institutes in Rome, Athens, Ankara, Jerusalem, Amman, Tehran, and Nairobi have acted as vital research hubs. And I pay tribute to their staff, some of whom have had to work in very testing circumstances in the past year.
- (2) Opening up new opportunities for UK researchers: the Academy is a member of the European Consortium for Asian Field Study (ECAAF), founded in 2007. This is

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<sup>2</sup> House of Commons, Home Affairs Select Committee, *Report on Student Visas Follow-Up*, released 26 July 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Wheeler, *British Academy*, pp. 16-22.

an alliance of forty European and Asian institutions concerned with Asian studies. It provides researchers with access to a network of 20 academic research centres across Asia.

- (3) Attracting the best and brightest: the Academy delivers Newton International Fellowships (in partnership with the Royal Society) which bring the best early-career researchers to the UK and provide follow-on support (after they leave the country) to develop long-term links with the UK. In addition, the Academy's Postdoctoral Fellowships are open to young scholars of any nationality who have obtained a doctorate from a UK university. Over the past three years, 40% of Postdoctoral Fellowships have been awarded to non-UK nationals.
- (4) Flexible support: the Academy's Small Research Grants, now happily restored and generously co-sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust, have long supported research of international significance. Half of the small research grant awards made in the most recent rounds went to scholars who intended to use the award to pursue research overseas.
- (5) Lobbying: The Academy has sought to ensure that research in our disciplines is properly reflected in EU research funding opportunities. An announcement acknowledging the importance of such funding was made by the EU Commissioner for Research, Innovation and Science, Máire Geoghegan-Quinn, in this auditorium last November.
- (6) Capacity-building: The Academy has worked with African and UK partners on the development of collaborative mechanisms to support researchers in sub-Saharan Africa.

Despite this record of achievement, the Academy faces challenges in how it addresses international issues, and in particular how it can deepen the UK's often shallow understanding of foreign societies. It is noteworthy that only one of our Sections, H3 - African and Oriental Studies - has a specific geographical descriptor in its title. One of the trickiest issues faced by the Section Structures Review is how best to ensure that the British Academy has proper and functionally useful representation in its Fellowship, and in its activities, of the various kinds of academic expertise in all parts of the world. A paper touching on this issue will go to Sections in October. Your thoughts on it will be very welcome.

While aware of the need to address such issues, the Academy is developing a programme of work focused on global challenges and opportunities. Consideration is being given, for example, to a possible study of the UK's 'soft power' assets -- those resources which contribute to the UK's standing and influence around the world. Many of these depend crucially on expertise in our disciplines. Proper

appreciation of them by policy-makers might also bring some balance in consideration of overseas engagements.

There are some important signs of recognition of positions long held by the Academy: we are witnessing at least the beginnings of a come-back by languages in both schools and universities; and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office is taking historical knowledge and languages more seriously now that it did five or ten years ago.

More generally, given the expertise within the Academy's Fellowship and the scholars that it funds, the Academy is well placed to provide authoritative and independent advice on how global challenges, such as climate change, economic relationships and population movements, might be addressed – with a vital context of historical awareness and understanding of the diverse societies and cultures around the world. I am confident that under future leadership the Academy will be especially well placed to tackle these very issues.

### ***3. Thanks***

I have various thanks to express this afternoon.

Thanks to Robin Jackson and all the staff for their hard, skilful and effective work through the year.

To all Fellows for their support – including the 40% of you who have given the Academy philanthropic support of one form or another over the last couple of years – an extraordinary level of participation, and very helpful as we increasingly talk to potential external supporters.

To retiring members of Council and chairs of Sections, and to retiring members of Academy Committees, I would like to thank you all individually and mention you all by name. Time forbids, but at least I should name the retiring officers, who have formed an exceptionally effective and cohesive team. I give heartfelt thanks:

To Professor Sue Mendus, retiring V-P Social Sciences. She has displayed in equal measure intellectual energy and common sense. She manages to keep her feet on the ground without ever for a moment being pedestrian.

To Professor Albert Weale, retiring V-P Public Policy, who was responsible for the creation and leadership of the Policy Centre. This was a huge responsibility: he emphasised the most rigorous quality control, and as a result he leaves his post with an innovative and impressive legacy.



To Professor Paul Brand, retiring after two terms as chair of the Academy Research Projects Committee, which oversees the kitemarking support the Academy offers to 50 long-term infrastructural projects.

To Professor Michael Kauffmann, retiring after six years as chair of the Pictures Committee, and responsible for the impressive display of art that now hangs in the Academy.

To Sir Roy Goode, who has completed his term as chair of the Fundraising Group, and has done much to get philanthropic fundraising going at this Academy. I am glad to say that we will continue to benefit from his enthusiasm and creativity as Senior Development Fellow.

I look forward to the annual dinner tonight – we have bumper numbers – where I shall say a word about each of these significant retirements.