

Address by the President

Lord (Nicholas) Stern

to the Annual General Meeting of the British Academy

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The purpose of the British Academy and our Fellowship is to foster the best research in the humanities and social sciences, and to take our ideas to the world; and in doing so, we champion our subjects, and show their importance and value. All this requires a strong Fellowship and the financial means. Thus, I want to speak about three main areas. The first is research, and taking out that research more widely. The second is resources. And the third is the Fellowship.

Research

Pursuing our research and engaging with the public are the ways by which we champion our subjects and show what we do. We should never be defensive, and we should never do down other subjects. We demonstrate why research in our subject areas matters so much by doing it and by taking it out there. That is what we try to do. And how do we do that? Let me identify four main routes, which I hope are fairly obvious, but which matter and which we must think about.

Fostering the finest research

The quality of the research the British Academy fosters is fundamental. As someone who, last year, led a review of the Research Excellence Framework (REF), I am keenly aware of how difficult it is to assess the quality of research. The ultimate test is whether we have thought of something, said something or analysed something in a way that changes the way people think about issues which are serious and difficult. But let me point to some numerical indicators of the quality of what we do.

The Academy receives somewhere between 3,500 and 4,000 applications, and we make about 500 awards. Our schemes are very competitive.

An assessment commissioned by the Funding Councils revealed that many more impact case studies in REF 2014 cited the Academy's support than support from the Wellcome Trust – a funding body with enormous resources. And of those case studies that were examined, the Academy's support was cited across 23 of the 36 REF units of assessment. We stress the importance of being interdisciplinary, and I think we show that we are.

We are the most important funder of the next generation of researchers in the humanities and social sciences. More than 200 alumni of our Postdoctoral Fellowships scheme are now professors, and 84% of former award holders are in academic posts.

Eighty-six per cent of our Mid-Career Fellowship holders reported that the award led to career advancement and the leveraging of new funding.

Our Small Research Grants are very powerful. For every £1 invested, our award holders report an average of over £20 subsequently generated. My own first grant was £750 in 1974 to study a village in Uttar Pradesh, India. I am still working on that village, and in terms of how much research funding we have subsequently expended there the multiplier of 20 is off by an order of magnitude.

By these crude measures, I think we can show that our research really is of the highest quality. But let me underline again: it is whether the ideas are any good that is the ultimate test.

Collaborating and demonstrating

The British Academy is part of the intellectual life of the nation. We have to bring evidence, reasons and values to public life, as people who are analytical, and as scientists in the very broad sense of the word. Our collaborative work with the three other national academies – particularly our closest neighbour, the Royal Society – is of special importance.

I often come back to the statement by Adam Roberts in *Prospering Wisely*: ‘I do not know of a single major problem that we face that does not require attention both from the physical sciences and from the social sciences and humanities.’¹ That is a perspective that we live by. And not only is it the right way to pursue intellectual enquiry, but it has turned out to be an effective and profitable way to survive in a very competitive world.

Let me list some obvious headings: common humanity, trust in institutions, identity, security, social cohesion, place, productivity, climate change, and obesity. For all the issues that we worry about – what it means to be human, how societies function, how we respond to the challenges that we face – it is very important that we bring to the problem what the problem needs, and not just stick to our own narrow perspectives or methods. We should celebrate expertise, we should be intense about the skills we have, and we should bring them to the table. That is what collaboration and demonstration mean.

Communicating and engaging

The British Academy is now a fixture at festivals. At the Hay Festival and the Edinburgh Festival, we are part of the story – there are always two or three Academy events. That is a big part of intellectual life, and I think we probably should do somewhat more of that.

We produced *Prospering Wisely* early in 2014 to try to show people what our subjects do by speaking in interesting ways about those subjects, and I think it has really stood the test of time. Once in a while I have gone back to have a look at it, and found that really helpful.

That led pretty quickly to the British Academy Debates. We have had events on ‘Ageing’, ‘Immigration’, ‘Well-being’, ‘Energy and the Environment’, ‘Faith’, ‘Inequalities’, and ‘Robotics and Artificial Intelligence’. Those are all areas about which people worry – and rightly so – and where we can bring serious evidence and analysis to the table. Above all, we have taken those Debates around the country. They have been real public engagements.

Our smaller ‘Breakfast Briefings’ and ‘Evenings with the President’ are a thoughtful, powerful and serious way of exchanging ideas on difficult and fundamental topics. We attract a very high quality attendance – people from business, from the cultural world, from government, from NGOs and charities, and of course from the intellectual world. For example, we had an excellent Breakfast Briefing just last week to discuss an aspect of our project on the ‘Future of the Corporation’.

The Academy’s Soirée is fantastic, and its ‘pop-up talks’ are cherished – people stop you in the street to tell you which ones they heard.

¹ *Prospering Wisely: How the humanities and social sciences enrich our lives* (British Academy, February 2014), p. 2.

We also engage with government. We have skills and scholarship that we can bring to the table. And people talk to you because you are from the British Academy. I have spoken to both of the Prime Ministers in my time as President, and to both of the Chancellors of the Exchequer. We have spoken to the Brexit Secretary. Of course Greg Clark and Jo Johnson at BEIS are people we need to interact with continually; and they seek our advice. We have been deepening our important relationship with the Department for International Development (DFID). Senior civil servants – not just ministers – struggle with difficult problems and pressures, and the Academy offers a special and precious place to sit quietly and talk about things that matter in a structured way.

Most recently we have been very involved with UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). I am completely convinced that as a nation we would not have got the extra money for research and innovation – moving up from £6 billion per annum under George Osborne to £8 billion under Philip Hammond – if an institutional structure had not simultaneously been created which they felt could deliver purposive research of high quality. We have been very much involved in setting up UKRI: I have been on the selection committee for the board members, and John Kingman, the chair, and Mark Walport seek our advice.

These are the kinds of relationships that matter enormously.

Enabling and inspiring the young

It seems to me that one of the obligations of the Fellowship of the Academy is bringing on the young, and I think we do quite a reasonable job.

I have already spoken about our Postdoctoral Fellowships. One of the most interesting bits of *Prospering Wisely* is the video of four Postdoctoral Fellows talking about their work.² We have involved them in the Soirée too.

However, while we do a reasonably good job, I think we could do still better on inspiring and bringing on the young, and that should be one of the challenges we set ourselves in the coming years.

Resources

Four years or so ago, the British Academy's budget was roughly £30 million per annum; now it is well over £40 million per annum. At the beginning of the period, we were being asked to write letters to BIS about what we would do if there were 30% cuts. The fact that it did not turn out that way was not by accident. Paul Nurse of the Royal Society and I put in a lot of effort, and the Council for Science and Technology did a good job. We showed that countries that invest in research and innovation (R&D) do much better than those that do not, and that we are near the bottom of the league amongst the more wealthy countries.

That argument eventually stuck. So we protected and expanded the British Academy budget by fighting for the research budget in the nation as a whole, and doing that arm-in-arm with our friends from the other academies. We even got it into the Conservative Party manifesto: there is an explicit target to raise investment in R&D from about 1.6% or 1.7% of GDP, public and private, to 2.4% in the medium term, and 3% of GDP in the longer term.³

² www.britac.ac.uk/prosperingwisely/interviews/postdoctorate_fellowships.htm

³ 'At the last autumn statement, we announced a significant increase in government investment in research and development. We will deliver this and ensure further growth so that overall, as a nation, we meet the current

Given the multiplier that roughly £1 of public money goes with £2 of private, that would mean taking public expenditure on R&D from about 0.5% of GDP up to 1% over time. However, that is an argument that we still have to keep fighting, working together with the other academies – while of course making the case very strongly for our own research.

We have also pursued new opportunities, particularly with DFID, and now those coming from the Global Challenges Research Fund and the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund. We have to keep responding to and pursuing those opportunities, and work to shape those opportunities in ways that make sense. We do not wait for other people to make the rules; we work to define what these research funds should be for and the scale that is necessary. This is what we have done, and what we will carry on doing.

Fellowship

Finally, the Fellowship is who we are. Election to the Fellowship is about excellence and about putting that excellence to work in the ways that I have already tried to describe. We are defined by the quality of the people we elect. Therefore the way in which we elect them is enormously important. We do this – and must be constantly watchful that we do this – in a responsible way with the highest standards of excellence.

In our elections, I think we are making some progress on gender; the evidence is there. And I would want to underscore the points made by Alun Evans in his Chief Executive's report, that we have lots more to do on age and ethnicity.

However, we have to *be* a Fellowship – to find ways to work together on interesting things, to talk to each other and exchange ideas. We have a Fellows' Room now where you can talk over a cup of tea (and, in addition, with a space where you can work quietly). But we need to do that digitally as well. We have been redesigning our website, so that the outside world can understand us better. But it should also be about our talking to each other. It ought to be possible, for example, to find out who in the Fellowship knows about 16th-century Indian history, and then to put that to use in collaboration and the exchange of ideas. That story of interaction is very important.

I also want to underscore what our Treasurer, Sarah Worthington, says about supporting the Academy, including through legacies. That is a way of being part of this community, this Fellowship.

Concluding remarks

I think the British Academy is in good health. I think it has a strong sense of purpose. But in all of the dimensions that I described – the research and taking it out there, the resources, and the Fellowship – there is so much more to do.

I feel very cheerful about the Academy. It is a special place, it is a special group of people. And I want to thank you all for the support, collegiality and collaboration of these last four years.

I leave the Academy in the capable and enthusiastic hands of David Cannadine. I was not involved in the appointment, but I cannot tell you how happy I was that those who were involved in the appointment came to that decision. He is a wonderful historian who puts his

OECD average for investment in R&D – that is, 2.4 per cent of GDP – within ten years, with a longer-term goal of three per cent.' *Forward, Together* (The Conservative Party Manifesto 2017), p. 19.

fine research and communication skills to work, bringing insights and serious lessons of history to the issues of our time.

Finally, let us all celebrate the Academy and what it stands for, help drive it forward, be part of the Fellowship, do wonderful research, take out our ideas, engage with science as a whole, shine a light on what it means to be human, and stand strong for values, reasons and evidence. In brief, demonstrate the values of the Enlightenment.