

The Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences in the Modern University

Rt Hon. David Willetts, Minister of State for Universities and Science, gave a speech at the British Academy on 1 March 2011. The Minister was introduced by Professor Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy.

ADAM ROBERTS

It's a huge pleasure to welcome David Willetts here to the British Academy, both to declare our newly refurbished premises officially open, and to deliver a speech on the arts, humanities and social sciences – which I know he views as an important statement of what he thinks about the subjects that this Academy exists to advance.

When the British Academy took on the lease of Nos. 10 and 11 Carlton House Terrace in 1998, the Foreign Press Association were our subtenants in much of No. 11, having occupied the space since 1945. When they moved out in summer 2009, the Academy decided to take

over this space, and renovate it with a view to enlarging the scale of events supported on behalf of the social sciences and humanities. In particular, we had long recognised the need to have a decent auditorium; it was deeply unsatisfactory that an Academy, for which academic lectures are a central part of its activities, did not have such a thing.

At a time of extreme financial stringency, the work to convert the buildings for the new use was generously funded by a capital grant of £2 million from the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) – a grant that dates back to the period of the preceding government, and has been carried forward by the present government.



Professor Sir Adam Roberts, President of the British Academy, introduces Rt Hon. David Willetts MP, in the Academy's new Wolfson Auditorium, on 1 March 2011.

We have also had a grant from the Wolfson Foundation for £250,000 – in recognition of this Council has agreed that this new auditorium should be named the Wolfson Auditorium. And we have received contributions from Fellows of the Academy of very nearly the same amount (more than £225,000). We are extremely grateful to all those who have supported this big venture at such a difficult time.

Thanks are also due to our colleague, Professor Ray Pahl FBA, for his extraordinarily generous donation of the collection of modern British art which is displayed on the stairs and in the Gallery.

Work on the refurbishment of the new spaces in No. 11 began in May 2010, and was completed in February 2011. This work included new connecting doors at ground and first floor level between the buildings, the installation of new lifts and disabled facilities, and the provision of new office space in the basement and on the third floor.

No. 11 Carlton House Terrace was the London home of William Gladstone in his first years as Prime Minister: there is a fitting connection between his role as a public intellectual and the use to which we are able to put his former drawing room today.

It doesn't need me to tell anyone in this room – least of all the Minister – that this is a time of turbulence and radical change in higher education, and that these changes have been highly controversial within universities and indeed within this Academy. We at the Academy have a particular interest in their consequences for the humanities and social sciences.

There are inevitably differences of perspective between a self-governing academy of scholars and a government minister – even a minister who is also a scholar. I have written to the Minister on many issues. While I am not sure that all my letters were always welcome, I do note with appreciation that when I invited him to come and give a speech concerning the importance and value of the arts, humanities and social sciences, he accepted promptly. I am delighted that he is here at the Academy today, both to deliver this speech and to declare this Auditorium open.

DAVID WILLETTS

It is a great privilege to declare the enlarged British Academy formally open – and I am proud that BIS has sponsored this excellent refurbishment alongside the Wolfson Foundation and Academy Fellows.

I well remember 11 Carlton House Terrace as the headquarters of the Foreign Press Association. But, as Sir Adam has said, it is as Gladstone's London house that this building has its greatest historical significance – at least till now.

Originally a high Tory who stuck with Peel, later the greatest Liberal of them all, a man who never lost his faith in free trade – Gladstone is someone that all of us in the Coalition can celebrate. And here we should remember his exceptional intellectual curiosity, as reflected in his great library.

Even when he was over eighty, Gladstone was closely involved in the transfer of 32,000 of his books from Hawarden Castle to their new home a quarter of a mile away, undertaking much of the physical labour himself. Many of the books were moved by wheelbarrow. 'What man,' he wrote, 'who really loves his books delegates to any other human being, as long as there is breath in his body, the office of introducing them into their homes?' That library is still thriving, incidentally – the only prime ministerial library in Great Britain.

And for me personally there is another connection with Gladstone. I have very fond memories of doing tutorials on 'Britain since 1865', being tutored by the late Colin Matthew – who died so young – in Gladstone's old set at Christ Church. Colin himself, I think, made a fantastic contribution to our intellectual life with his work on the *Dictionary of National Biography*, as well as his work on Gladstone himself.

Today is an opportunity to recognise the ongoing significance in our intellectual life of both the British Academy itself and the humanities and social sciences – the disciplines you represent. Their distinctive qualities were neatly summarised by Sir Adam Roberts in his excellent introduction to your recent pamphlet: 'The humanities explore what it means to be human: the words, ideas, narratives and the art and artefacts that help us make sense of our lives and the world we live in; how we have created it and are created by it. The social sciences seek to explore through observation and reflection the processes that govern the behaviour of individual and groups. Together they help us to understand ourselves, our society and our place in the world.'¹

This is clearly the right place and the right occasion to tackle a worry in the academic community – and beyond – that the Coalition's policies on universities and on research are a threat to the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Last week, for example, Simon Schama expressed his fear that 'sciences and subjects which seem to be on a utilitarian measure useful have retained their state funding while the arts and humanities are being stripped of theirs'. Previously, Stefan Collini argued in the *London Review of Books* that the proposals contained in the Browne Report meant the 'dismantling of the public character of education.'

I would be concerned if these charges were true. And I am concerned that such distinguished thinkers could entertain them. Quite simply, the humanities and social sciences are essential to a civilised country. They bring deep fulfilment to us personally. They often give meaning and shape to our lives. Universities are among the most precious institutions any country possesses and they should be nurtured as such. Universities comprise a very high proportion of those European institutions which have lasted more than 500 years. That tells us something about their special value.

But rather than just assert that we in the Coalition value these disciplines, let me begin by clarifying what appears to be a genuine misunderstanding of our policies on funding, teaching and research – before turning to some deeper questions about their place in our universities.

Teaching

At the moment, the amount of money a university receives to teach is divided into four bands, depending on the type of subject. These different bandings are not judgements of the relative value of courses. They are supposed to reflect the objectively higher costs of teaching some types of subject:

Band A is worth around £17,800 per student and covers the most expensive-to-teach courses, like medicine and dentistry;

Band B is worth around £8,700 and is for lab-based science courses;

Band C is worth around £7,100 and covers subjects with a fieldwork element; and

Band D is for all other subjects and is worth around £6,000.

Currently, there is a standard expectation that, for every undergraduate course, some £3,300 of these costs will be covered by tuition fees and loans. The key feature of the reforms proposed by Lord Browne is to remove about £4,000 of the basic teaching costs covered by grant across all subjects and put it into the hands of students. They will be lent the money to pay the higher fees and only pay back as graduates when they earn more than £21,000 – a more progressive repayment system than present.

That means teaching grant will generally only remain for subjects in Bands A and B at a level about £4,000 lower than now. A university wishing to cover its existing costs for these courses may decide to set an average graduate contribution of around £7,000.

This is a scrupulously neutral policy. But you will have noticed one special feature affecting arts and humanities courses, the vast majority of which are in Band D. For them, the loss of HEFCE grant that needs to be made up from higher graduate contributions is actually smaller. It amounts to around £2,700 – over £1,000 less, in fact, than the £4,000 all other subjects are losing in teaching grant.

So, to cover the existing costs of a Band D student, most institutions should only need to charge £6,000 – or perhaps a bit more once inflation has been accounted for. As I said in my Dearing Lecture a fortnight ago, the maximum allowable charge of £9,000 in 2012/13 would actually represent an increase for them of over 40 per cent even after inflation, as against an increase of 20 per cent or so for the other disciplines.

A lot depends on how universities choose to respond to these financial changes but you could argue that the replacement of teaching grant is greater for disciplines outside the arts and humanities because humanities and social sciences were receiving less already. So even though it is correct, strictly speaking, that these disciplines have lost their teaching grant, it is wrong to see this as any kind of bias against them.

Even when there will be no teaching grant for a discipline, that does not mean there is no Exchequer contribution. In fact, there is still a lot of taxpayer money going into universities but in rather different ways. As I said in a speech to Universities UK last week, we're looking at about £6.5 billion in tuition loans (on top of £2 billion of remaining teaching grant going to the high-cost subjects), £2 billion in maintenance grants and scholarships, and £3.5 billion in maintenance loans. We estimate that the cash going to universities in grants and fee loans combined could be 10 per cent higher by 2014-15 than it is now. Indeed we can afford this only because we get a lot of it back, eventually, from higher-paid graduates. Of the £10 billion we will be allocating in loans, around 30 per cent will be written off by the taxpayer, quite rightly, because some graduates do not earn enough to pay them back. This long-term contribution from the taxpayer helps to make this a progressive system.

There are some disciplines officially classified as 'strategically important and vulnerable'. In our grant letter, Vince Cable and I asked HEFCE to consider 'what subjects, including arts, humanities and social sciences subjects' should qualify. HEFCE will begin a consultation in May on how the remaining teaching grant should be allocated, and will present final proposals by Autumn for implementation in 2012/13.

There are also some relatively small, specialist institutions – like conservatoires – which have unusually high overheads. In the same letter, Vince and I hope that HEFCE will 'continue to make dedicated funding available' for these important subjects and institutions – 'for the foreseeable future'.

Will young people be willing to pay higher fees – even though they are funded upfront by the Exchequer – for the humanities and social sciences, or will they prefer other subjects instead? The evidence is that these subjects are actually very popular – representing almost half of all applications. Student numbers in these subjects – undergraduate and postgraduate – increased by 40 per cent between 2001/02 and 2009/10. And this is not because of some uniquely British focus on these disciplines. Our reputation in these disciplines is global – among non-EU students, the increase in these disciplines has been almost 80 per cent.

Employability is something students may think about more seriously, even though they will only start repaying their graduate contributions at the higher threshold of more than £21,000. I do not believe this is a test that these great disciplines need worry about where they are well taught in universities which attach high value to the quality of the student experience.

I have taken you through this analysis at some length because the charge of a bias against humanities and social sciences is very serious. But, quite plainly, our higher education reforms have no such bias. Your disciplines are cornerstones of academia.

Research

Now let's look at research. As a result of the Comprehensive Spending Review, we have a ring-fenced, cash-protected budget of £4.6 billion for science and research. That is evidence of our strong commitment to research, even in tough times.

It is sometimes called the science ring fence but it contains funding for all the research councils, including the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the Economic and Social Research Council. It also includes funding for university research via the Research Assessment Exercise, which is worth £1.6 billion a year in England. This element of research funding is included in the ring fence for the first time. It is of particular value to the arts, humanities and social sciences, as they traditionally get about a third of it. Perhaps some people have not appreciated that we have protected the cash research budgets to a far greater extent than the previous government.

When Sir Adrian Smith consulted the research community and National Academies – including this one – about the specific allocation of funds within the research budget, there was a strong view that the balance between the different disciplines should not be shifted. There are always some specific pressures, such as the effect of exchange rate pressures on disciplines where research is financed via international subscriptions. However we have maintained the broad balance between the different research councils. The combined allocations in 2011-12 for the AHRC, ESRC and the British Academy will be a little over £280 million. Once again, we have not favoured one discipline with public funding at the expense of another.

Capital spending is outside the ring-fenced budget for research. I accept that this is where financial pressures are acute, but even here we have still been able to support really important projects such as the UK Centre for Medical Research and Innovation and the Diamond Synchrotron at Harwell. However, big capital projects are not just the preserve of the physical sciences. Today I can announce a major commitment to capital spending on social science research.

Birth cohort studies

British birth cohort studies are acknowledged worldwide as unique data resources which have underpinned innovative research on the health, socio-economic status and wellbeing of people in our country. The five studies to date – in 1946, 1958, 1970, 1990, and, most recently, in 2000 – have followed large cohorts of babies from birth into adulthood. They have yielded a series of important findings and have influenced crucial areas of healthcare policy and education – from alcohol consumption and obesity to child development. The lively debate about declining social mobility has largely been driven by comparing the 1958 and 1970 birth cohorts – and finding that those born in 1958 were more likely than those born in 1970 to move from families with the lowest incomes to enjoying high incomes as adults. And when you read stories about how effective early intervention actually is or about the effects on a child's development of different patterns of parental work, they are likely to draw on the analysis of the millennium birth cohort.

Today, I'm delighted to announce that we are proceeding with the 2012 birth cohort study, which – in addition to its predecessors – will investigate how pre-natal influences, as well as the interplay of genetic and environmental factors, affect human development. The 2012 study will be the first UK-wide cohort for whom information will be captured before birth and in the first year of life. It will also examine differences within and between ethnic groups.

Who are these babies? Project leaders will recruit 90,000 pregnant women from 25 different UK maternity units. Parents will be invited to attend one of eight BCS Centres between the 25th and 30th week of pregnancy, when they will complete a questionnaire and provide samples. Mothers will then bring their babies to the same centres at four and 12 months to be weighed, measured and provide further samples. At the same appointments, experts will carry out detailed neuro-developmental assessments of the babies.

The second part of this £33.5 million project involves a programme to unlock the full potential of the existing studies. A new facility will enable social scientists to compare and contrast the experiences of the different birth cohorts, from the generation born into post-war Britain to the children of Olympics 2012. It will put us at the cutting edge of research in public health, education and social integration. For me personally, with my interest in fairness between the generations, this new resource should transform our ability to compare the lives and life chances of different generations.

Both aspects of the project are crucial to the Government's social mobility agenda, led by Nick Clegg. Tracking successive generations is essential to determining whether people are able to rise above the status of their parents. A crucial ambition of the Coalition is for children born next year to have greater opportunities to make their ways in life than the children born at the start of the millennium. This database will enable our performance to be judged over years to come. And of course it is a means of improving public policy by building up the evidence about what works and what doesn't.

And perhaps I can make one other point here. You will have noticed a twenty-year gap in cohort studies between 1970 and 1990. It is regrettable that the Conservative government of the 1980s chose not to commission a cohort study during that decade. Today's announcement demonstrates that this Government has a different approach. Despite the tough times, we are committed to gathering vital data – in the truest sense of the word – and to making full use of Britain's strengths in social science.

Research Excellence Framework

There has been another announcement today of interest to many people here. HEFCE and the Devolved Funding Bodies have confirmed that they are putting a 20 per cent weighting on impact in the new Research Excellence Framework (REF), when it succeeds the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) in 2014.

Quality-related Research funding (QR) is a major income stream for some of our most competitive universities. In recent years, Bath, for example, has used QR money to establish the only UK research centre devoted to the social aspects of death, dying and bereavement. Exeter

has supported its Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies. And for individual scholars, QR is often the main source of co-funding – enabling fellows and temporary lecturers to establish themselves and complete research projects.

I know there are some in academia who have fears about impact. I myself was a sceptic, for we must never jeopardise blue skies research. Indeed, one reason for the £5 million increase in the British Academy budget in the spending review was to boost fundamental research among the next generation of scholars.

My own fear was that impact assessment would end up requiring clunky attempts to make impossible predictions about the impact of research activity. That's why I decided to delay the REF for a year for HEFCE to review its design, and decide how impact could best be assessed. HEFCE has since piloted it across several disciplines. The REF Panel on English Language and Literature was – by all accounts – one of the star turns in the pilot exercise. Indeed, the British Academy, the AHRC and the ESRC have each published excellent accounts of the impact of research in their fields.

When introduced, the REF will reward academics who wish to spend part of their career outside universities – in, say, a cultural institution – and recognise the incidental impacts of excellent scholarship.

It will have other benefits too. A number of scholars have spoken to me about the constraints of peer review. Richard Smith has described some of these in his book, *The Trouble with Medical Journals* – and they can affect the humanities and social sciences too. They affect the historian or the social scientist who feel they must investigate their subject in Massachusetts or Michigan – rather than Caithness or Cornwall – to increase their chances of having an article accepted by a prestigious US journal. The particular structure of academic publishing in some subjects – with so many of the leading journals based abroad and rewarding, above all, theoretical innovation – can itself distort research activity in some disciplines, such as business studies or economics. And for me as a layman who tries to draw on research in these disciplines, I hope proper value can be given to the review essay, the masterful scholarly book with a broad sweep, and to those academics willing to work for a time outside academia – giving policy advice, for example. I would welcome a more open debate in academia about these issues. Perhaps there is a role for the British Academy here.

Peer review is clearly a global gold standard. It means critical assessment by international scholars and engages audiences beyond our shores. However, peer review is not the only measure of success. The REF will, I hope, reward other achievements.

The value of the humanities and social sciences

One worry about impact has been that scholarship just becomes a means to something else. I say again that your disciplines are fundamentally worthwhile in and of themselves. They are deep sources of human satisfaction, helping us to navigate our way through the world – both as individuals and as a society.

But there is a paradox: as soon as we start trying to explain why they have this value, we focus on utilitarian outcomes. That is a theme of

the recent collection sponsored by the AHRC and edited by Jonathan Bate, *The Public Value of the Humanities*. His collection follows on from the important recent book *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* by Martha Nussbaum, herself a Corresponding Fellow of this Academy.²

This public value comes across most clearly when we see how the natural and medical sciences find themselves needing to draw on insights from arts, humanities and social sciences. Perhaps I can briefly offer two examples of this.

After the attempted bomb plot over Detroit in December 2009, lawyers, ethical philosophers and psychologists got together in two workshops with computer scientists and physicists to discuss aviation security. The solution to safer air travel is not only about introducing state-of-the-art sensors, for example; they must be compatible with democratic values and the expectations of travellers.

Then again, I was recently at a meeting to discuss the contribution of our research to international development. We can be very proud that drugs and vaccines emerging from research funded by the Medical Research Council tackle the diseases of the developing world. But then the medical researchers said that discovering the drug was not the end of the process. One problem they had encountered was that, in some developing countries, people were very wary of drugs or vaccinations promoted by Westerners and even feared they were a plot to damage their health. The medics needed to understand where these beliefs came from and how they spread, if they were to run a successful vaccination programme. That meant learning from research on local cultures, the dissemination of rumour, and attitudes to medicine. Almost every really big issue needs to be looked at from the perspective of different disciplines. That is why humanities and social sciences are quite rightly at the heart of contemporary enquiry.

Integrity of the university

Let me end by considering the place of the humanities and social sciences within universities as our reforms are introduced over the coming years. Among the concerns expressed by Stefan Collini, for example, is that a more contractual relationship between students and institutions will undermine teaching and learning, and indeed the very identity of the university. I always learn from Stefan's beautiful and intelligent essays on these issues. But perhaps I can risk three challenges to his argument.

First, I do actually want the student to have a stronger consumer voice. Over the past decades, universities have had such strong incentives to focus on research that the role of teaching has been undervalued. That has to change. It is one of the most important reasons for putting financial power in the hands of the student. And that has to be backed up with information on all those practical issues from promptness of academic feedback to how many seminars you will get.

This sort of consumerism should not jeopardise the relationship between teacher and student – in fact it brings it back to the heart of the university. Why should students lose respect for their lecturers as macroeconomists or linguists because they have clarity on contact hours or about the ways in which certain disciplines will help to

develop their broader skills? And I am four square with Stefan when he says that these consumers are – as graduates – paying for an education, not for a degree. We will be robust in protecting the boundaries around academic integrity and freedom.

My second response is to accept that some students go to university as a route to a job. This is part of the role of the university in a modern economy and we should not be too sniffy about it. After all, it is probably how universities began, training people for jobs in the church or staffing the royal administration.

Take a lone parent who might have left school at 16 without much by way of qualifications and is now struggling to raise her children. But she wants to do better by her family and so she is studying part-time at a local university so she can get a qualification to work as a radiographer. She may have a 'transactional relationship' with her local university, but there is still a fundamental nobility to what she is doing. We should respect her for it and we should respect the universities, not always the most prestigious, which provide such opportunities.

Even if it is not particle physics or Jane Austen, it is still entirely worthwhile: it transforms people's lives for the better. And you know there are quite a few affluent students with opportunities in life a lot better than hers for whom university is also, essentially, a route to a job.

Our higher education system accommodates students with all sorts of goals. And students with the most utilitarian of intentions may change once they start a degree course and experience university life. Last Friday, a young man studying at Southampton Solent University came to see me in my constituency office. He was studying journalism and wanted a trial interview with me on my book, *The Pinch*.³ He described how he had come to university pretty uninterested in what happens in the wider world, but the experience had got him hooked on politics and the news. That awakening happens at university for hundreds of thousands of young people every year.

But the third response to Stefan is the most important. Our universities are very special places indeed. I have the good fortune to visit many of them. I always enjoy the notice boards with posters about a new indie band on tour, a special lecture by a visiting expert, invitations to audition for a play, a campaign against injustice somewhere in the world. It is a glimpse into a kind of community many of us on the outside rather envy. It works because it brings together such a diverse range of people and such a range of interests.

Stefan's deepest fear is that the university, as an institution like this, is at risk of unravelling. But I am an optimist. The institution works because of its range. Arts, humanities and social sciences are a crucial part of the life of such institutions, just as they form an important part of our own lives.

Note

- 1 *The British Academy's booklet Past, Present and Future: The Public Value of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, published in June 2010, is available via www.britac.ac.uk/policy
- 2 For Professor Nussbaum's lecture to the British Academy on this subject, held on 16 December 2010, go to www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010
- 3 For the British Academy's panel discussion on *The Pinch*, held on 2 March 2010, go to www.britac.ac.uk/events/2010

Rt Hon. David Willetts is Minister of State for Universities and Science (attending Cabinet), and has been the Member of Parliament for Havant since 1992.



David Willetts holding Gladstone's hat outside the front door of Gladstone's former home, No. 11 Carlton House Terrace. Photos: Matt Crossick.