

NEWTON INTERNATIONAL FELLOWSHIPS

On 16 February 2010, an event was held at the Royal Society to celebrate the success of the Newton International Fellowships scheme. The Fellowships are awarded by the British Academy, the Royal Society and the Royal Academy of Engineering to attract outstanding postdoctoral researchers to the UK for two years. The aim of the event was to showcase the work of the Newton Fellows, and to highlight the UK as an attractive country in which to carry out world-class research. In an introductory speech, **Professor Graham Furniss FBA** discussed the personal and professional value of establishing a network of close relationships with scholars across the world.

THE UNIVERSITIES are abuzz with speculation. Will it be 5 per cent cuts each year for the next five or will it be 10 per cent? Who will go to the wall? Where will the mergers and acquisitions be? Which departments will close? Which disciplines will be in decline? Will the supposed ring-fencing of Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics subjects mean that it is Humanities and Social Science that will be decimated? Endless speculation. In this feverish debate we have furnished ourselves with plenty of tools to fight each other with, watched by a bemused public and government – the Russell Group against the 1994 Group against Millennium Plus, even the alignment of the non-aligned staking out their battlegrounds. We have Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) scores, we have efficiency markers, we have ratios, thresholds and benchmarks, we have weighing and measuring systems that are now so sophisticated that competitiveness and ranking are absolutely integral to everything UK universities do. Designed in a time of growth, they are available for a very different purpose in a time of contraction. Admittedly, the league tables and the jockeying for position are not only built around metrics – the staff-student ratios, the numbers of research students, the completion rates, the amount of research grant income, the volume of knowledge-transfer activity – the RAE process over the years has mercifully retained at its core the judgement by colleagues of the quality of work produced, the measurability of excellence based upon human intellectual judgement. The tyranny of the quantifiable has not entirely invaded the domain of the judge-able, and long may it remain so!

But is this competitive inter-institutional jockeying the framework that supports the advancement of scholarship? It is true that there have always been rivalry and competition in the advancement of knowledge – claim and counter-claim are the drivers of debate. But ask any coal-face academic what drives them forward in their research and teaching and I'm sure it won't be more than one in a hundred who thinks of his or her institution's jockeying for position first and foremost. However they define it, I suspect that he or she will talk about their subject first and foremost, the intrinsic interest of the issues they feel passionate about. They will be focused upon those *other* people who share their concerns – their current and former research students, those

among their immediate colleagues to whom they show their material, those friends and colleagues in their international networks that they meet at conferences, those who pass on papers, comment on each others' work, people with whom they *share*. This is the everyday, invisible, unquantifiable, unmetrified, ebb and flow of intellectual life. How does it come about and how is it sustained? It comes about through getting to know people, by moving out from a departmental home, into other institutions, and into other networks. It comes about as the doctoral student becomes an early career researcher whose first articles and first published monograph make a mark, and who is then invited to a conference and then another. But what drives that kind of trajectory? It is the encounters with other individuals and the beginning of long-term academic friendships that sustain. There are of course lone scholars whose very aloneness sustains a productive scholarly life. But surely for most it is an array of different forms of commitment, of relationships built on trust, that sustains a scholarly life – things like common interest, mutuality, obligation, concern, loyalty, respect, and simple friendship. Of course, the obverse of these



Figure 1. Professor Graham Furniss FBA speaking at the event to celebrate the first two years of the Newton International Fellowships scheme. Photo: Tracey Croggon.

values can equally sustain a long life of rivalry and disrespect, and we are all aware of what a motivating factor those things can be. My point is, however, that these are real drivers of what goes on underneath the measurable metrics and the competitive institutional processes that are supposed to nurture and support the advance of human knowledge within the disciplinary structures of 'the university'.

Personal experience

As a young doctoral student in Nigeria in 1973 I found myself, after some months, on the verge of abandoning my project and seeking my salvation elsewhere. Then, one evening I found myself in the private library of a Hausa scholar and politician, Malam Aminu Kano, who was a well-known opponent of the British colonial government and the conservative regime that succeeded it in Nigeria after independence. During the conversation, he asked me about my project on a group of contemporary Hausa poets and, after I had poured out all my woes, he insisted that I should not give up. He introduced me to two young lecturers at the university who unpicked the tangles I had got myself into with certain people, and with whom I began to build a friendship that lasted over many years. To become entangled in a web of ongoing obligations, exchange, mutuality, trust and commitment has been one of the pleasures of my academic life, and the fact that I am here now at all is down to that one moment in Kano in 1973. Later on, both those lecturers came for periods of time to London. While I know they would say they benefited enormously from the many friendships they made in the UK, it was we who benefited more from their knowledge, their perspectives, and their questions.

You can see where I am going. Knowledge is an ever more unbounded business built upon trust and reciprocity. While the UK Border Agency may make it harder and harder for colleagues to come to this country, technology can mitigate the damage in terms of sending and receiving messages – but it cannot in the end substitute for the face to face process of making friends and building trust between people. The Newton International Fellowships scheme, which we celebrate today, crucially addresses the need to build those relationships that, one hopes, will be sustained over a lifetime. Does it build on measurable excellence? – yes it does, through the judgements that are made about quality, quality of project and quality of people. Does it build on mutuality? – yes it does, by providing for the best talent from abroad to build their relationships here in the UK. It exposes UK scholarly communities to people who can bring new perspectives, new questions. It can open up possible UK parochialism to the existence of whole other communities of scholarship, and this will be ever more significant as universities in China, the Indian sub-continent, and elsewhere, come to populate and re-orient the scholarly networks in

the years to come. And the Newton Fellowships are designed with an afterlife to them. An alumni network and further support will look to refresh and renew the relationships that have been established over the two years. In the course of discussing frameworks for collaboration between UK and African scholars working in the Humanities and Social Sciences, the result of which was the joint British Academy/ACU *Nairobi Report*,¹ it became apparent that, for many younger scholars, it is the ongoing opportunity to maintain and build upon friendships and working relationships beyond the period of a Scholarship or Fellowship that is crucial to longer-term productivity as a researcher and vitality as a teacher. It is an issue that the Commonwealth Scholarships Commission are very aware of and one which it is good to see the Newton Fellowship scheme is addressing.

I congratulate all Newton Fellows here present and I wish you both success in your academic enterprises, and most of all, I hope you will be able to say, as Humphrey Bogart says to Claude Rains at the end of the film *Casablanca*, 'This could be the beginning of a beautiful friendship!'

Note

- 1 *The Nairobi Report: Frameworks for Africa–UK Research Collaboration in the Social Sciences and Humanities*, published by the British Academy and the Association of Commonwealth Universities in March 2009.

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The Newton International Fellowships aim to attract the world's best postdoctoral researchers to the UK for two years. Funding for follow-on activities may be available for up to 10 years after the Newton International Fellows have returned overseas, with the aim of maintaining links with the UK. The Fellowships cover the broad range of natural and social sciences, engineering and the humanities. Further information may be found at www.newtonfellowships.org
