CHAPTER 18

Beyond Brexit: the Road ahead for UK Universities

Leszek Borysiewicz

At the time of writing this essay, I'm in the final year of my seven-year tenure as Vice-Chancellor at the University of Cambridge, long enough for me to notice when things have turned a full cycle. I took up the post amid a flurry of government policy proposals affecting British universities. These included the introduction of higher fees, the loosening of the regulatory framework for higher education providers, and a greater emphasis on student experience and widening participation.

The surge in attention from the government caused what I described, back then, as "an existential panic" for the university sector, triggered by the bout of changes in state policy. Some of those changes have, indeed, had a profound impact on British universities.

Almost seven years later, we are in the midst of yet another spate of government policies and — it seems to me — another spell of existential jitters. British universities are prone to regular pangs of paranoia, panic and plunging self-confidence. But I am reminded of that line by Joseph Heller: "Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they aren't after you."

I am aware of the pitfalls of committing one's forecasts to paper (especially when they won't be published until a much later date). Whatever the political landscape is at the time of publication, there are key issues that will continue to shape and affect the United Kingdom's university sector in years to come — let's call them, to use that ill-fated phrase, the "known unknowns". Among the most salient, to me, are the UK's departure from the EU; the implementation of the new Higher Education and Research Act; and the challenge to all universities presented by growing scepticism about the role of expertise and knowledge. It is these issues I wish to address in the following pages.

LEAVING –BUT GOING WHERE?

After 44 years of a fruitful and occasionally fractious relationship, the UK and the EU are now, in the words of novelist John Irving, "involved in that awkward procedure of getting to unknow each other".

The exact nature of the UK's new relationship with its 27 European partners will not be clear until a couple of years from now. No matter what the results are of the complex negotiations that lie ahead, the implications for British universities cannot be over-stated. They will have an impact on our ability to recruit and retain international students and staff. They will affect our ability to compete for European research funding. And they will reduce our ability to become part of, and lead, networks of collaborative research.

People

British universities' reputation for excellence hinges on having excellent people. Whether it is the brightest undergraduate and postgraduate students, or the best academic and support staff, we rely on the talent of people from all over the world who study, teach, do research or work at our institutions.

The prospect of Brexit has inevitably caused unease and insecurity among EU nationals working and studying at universities in the United Kingdom: 17% of all academic staff in the UK, comprising tenured and postdoctoral researchers, are nationals of other EU countries. At many of the research-intensive Russell Group universities, this number is considerably higher — at the University of Cambridge it is close to 23%.

In fact, at these Russell Group universities over 30% of academics in areas of strategic importance including economics, maths, IT, software engineering, are from other EU countries. The same is true for Modern Languages.

There are around 125,000 students from other EU countries studying at UK universities, representing 5% of the nation's total student population. Almost half of them study at Russell Group universities. At Cambridge, non-UK EU students make up 10% of our undergraduate population and almost one quarter of our postgraduates.

According to one study by Universities UK, students from other EU countries attending UK universities generate £3.7 billion for the UK economy and support more than 34,000 jobs across the country (THE, 2016).

The risk to our ability to continue attracting excellent staff and students is tangible, as suggested by the 14% drop in undergraduate applications from other EU nationals for the academic year beginning in 2017.

The UK government's announcement that non-UK EU students will continue to be eligible for the same financial support as their UK peers for the 2018-2019 academic year is certainly welcome — but it doesn't offer the

long-term certitude that families need to make significant life choices such as where to pursue a course of studies.

Meanwhile, the uncertainty surrounding the migratory status of EU nationals working at British universities has had a chilling effect on our reputation as a country that keeps its doors open to talent from around the world.

As the government conducts negotiations to disentangle the UK from the EU, British universities have called for clarity about the future rights of residence of other EU nationals we employ. We have asked that any post-Brexit immigration system should ensure minimal barriers for future staff and students from those other EU countries. Finally, we have recommended that international students should not be classified as long-term migrants for the purposes of public policy — a recommendation that has not, to our regret, been adopted.

Research

European research funding has been a very significant part of the UK's funding portfolio. The UK was awarded €6.9 billion of competitive funding under the Seventh Framework Programme (FP7) — equivalent to over 15% of total EU funding for research.

It has secured €3.3 billion so far under Horizon2020 (close to 16% of total funding), and has the highest levels of participation in H2020-funded projects.

In the year 2015-16 alone, Russell Group universities secured over €700m of EU funding for research that will help to improve health, society and the economy.

Once again, the University of Cambridge has done well in this area: our researchers were awarded €424m under FP7 (2007-13). Under H2020, they have been granted €180m so far.

We especially value the impact of funding from the European Research Council (ERC), which rewards research that is truly innovative and which, by taking big conceptual risks, is able to tackle big questions.

The UK has been the largest recipient of ERC awards — between 2007 and 2015, almost a quarter (24%) of all ERC funding was awarded to UK-based researchers.

Since its foundation in 2007, the ERC has funded more than 1,500 projects by UK-based academics. In practice, this has been equivalent to having an additional Research Council, handing out awards for innovative, risk-taking research.

With 218 of those awards so far, Cambridge is the greatest beneficiary of ERC grants under the current H2020 program. In fact, 14 of our PIs are recipients of a second ERC grant. We have one pair of siblings with one ERC grant each, and at least one married couple with their respective "His" and "Hers" ERC awards.

We consistently hear from our academics that an ERC grant allows them the time and the freedom to innovate and take risks with their research. They are able to pursue their ideas wherever they may lead them. They are able to recruit, build and train teams of PhD students and postdocs who are then likely to move on to their own successful career paths. In the words of one of our grantees, the ERC offers a financial model that "enables us to do work that is 15 or 20 years ahead of the rest of the world".

The issue is not only access to funding, which is essential, but also access to facilities, on which much of the cutting-edge research depends.

All of which raises some inevitable questions: how will the country and its universities make up for the very likely shortfall in funding of excellence-driven research when the UK finally exits the EU? Under what circumstances, and at what cost, will UK-based researchers be allowed to use European facilities when we are no longer full members of European research schemes?

There are some promising signs. The current government seems to be in no doubt about the value that well-funded, research-intensive universities can add to their strategies for growth. Ministers have hinted that, even as we disengage from the EU, there are European programs (including Horizon2020) that we might wish to keep paying into. One suspects, however, that the decision of what European programs we continue to be part of in the future will not be entirely up to our own Ministers. In the meantime, the question of whether there will be a mechanism to replace the ERC's excellence-driven research looms larger than ever.

Collaboration

The challenge to available research funding posed by Brexit is matched by the challenge to Britain's proven capacity to establish, to be part of, and to lead networks of international collaboration. Research is a global endeavour. Tackling some of the most urgent problems — whether it is ageing societies, infectious disease or climate change — demands collaboration across disciplines and across borders.

Even at this stage, where we continue to be part of the EU, and to win very significant European awards, there seems to have been a collective loss of confidence in the UK's ability to lead research consortia — and, among some of our European partners, a loss of appetite for collaborations with the UK. Both are short-sighted and ill-advised reactions, though perhaps understandable.

We know that approximately 60% of papers co-authored by UK-based academics are done in collaboration with European partners. Germany, France and Italy together account for 16% of papers co-authored by UK-based researchers — higher than the US, with 13.7% of the share.

As a member state of the EU, the UK has been able to influence the formulation of European research policies and priorities. It articulated the case for the award of research funding on the basis of excellence, and has been able to influence policy on research ethics, open access and regulatory frameworks.

Switzerland learned, through bitter experience, the implications of being excluded from regular participation in the H2020 framework programme. One question for the UK in years ahead is: will we be able not only to have access to the next Framework Programme (FP9), but also to influence how its priorities are set — and to ensure that it maintains its focus on excellence? The best-case scenario, at the moment, is that we will find a way to participate in future Framework Programmes, but will be mostly unable to shape those discussions or help set the agenda.

A FINE BALANCE: THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND RESEARCH ACT

However one feels about Brexit and its impact on our institutions, there is no doubting that it will happen. And, in time, it will be the new normal. We cannot make the weather — but we can prepare for it.

Alongside the impact of Brexit, we must consider the effect of what one member of the House of Lords called "the most important legislation for the [higher education] sector in 25 years". Indeed, the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA), passed into law at the end of April, is likely to underpin the work of the higher education sector for a long time to come.

Focusing on students

I cited in my introduction the surge in policy proposals affecting universities when I first took up the office of Vice-Chancellor in 2010. The purpose of the reforms back then was, to use the government's words, to "put students at the heart of the system".

This most recent change in higher education legislation has taken those reforms further. It creates a new regulatory and funding body for universities, the Office for Students (OfS), which will have statutory responsibility for quality and standards, approve the creation of new universities, and confer title- and degree-awarding powers.

The HERA makes provision for a Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), carried out by the OfS, to assess the quality of teaching in universities. The controversial link between TEF results and universities' ability to raise fees above inflation has been put on hold until 2020, following a review of the TEF.

The UK higher education sector has broadly welcomed the developments heralded by the passing of the HERA, in particular the spelling out of a more

strategic direction from the government. This is much needed at a time when other external issues like Brexit and increasing competition from universities around the world, are a challenge to our competitiveness.

Maintaining autonomy

One worry for many Universities when the legislation was proposed was that the new provisions would impinge significantly on our autonomy. Misgivings about the power given to the new regulatory bodies have been somewhat mitigated. Institutional autonomy remains one of the salient features of the new Act, which goes some way towards codifying institutional autonomy.

The opening section of the Act explicitly states as one of the OfS's requirements "the need to protect the institutional autonomy of English higher education providers". The Act goes further, and sets out to define institutional autonomy as universities' freedom to manage themselves, to determine the content of their courses and the manner in which they are taught, to determine the criteria for selection or dismissal of staff, to determine the criteria for admission of students, to question and test received wisdom, and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions.

Restructuring research funding

Another significant feature of the Act is the wholesale reform of the research funding structures. This is good news. On the research side, the UK's seven research councils will be reorganized under a single strategic research body called UK Research and Innovation (UKRI).

The creation of UKRI responds to the need to simplify structures and reduce bureaucracy. It will allow a better coordinated and more strategic global approach to research funding. The new body will be able to focus on cross-cutting issues in ways that the various separate funding agencies could not easily do in the past. It will be able to set up mechanisms for sharing expertise and data. Crucially, and perhaps for the first time, the UK's research sector will have in the newly appointed head of UKRI a champion in government.

Marketization or necessary reform?

Critics of the HERA have claimed that it slavishly follows a global trend in the marketization of higher education. I understand this to be a necessary reform in a sector that is already stretched to the point at which it is unable to make the contribution to society that we all expect it to make.

I was the beneficiary of a system that offered a full university education, at no cost to students. But when I went to University, only 7% of the UK's population went to University. Today, that number is closer to 50%. The introduction, and subsequent increase, of student fees was an inevitable result of this trend.

In a system where students (or their families) are expected to contribute to their education, should there not be an expectation that they are offered a good student experience? Should our teachers and researchers not be challenged to raise their standards? Should students not be better informed, and better represented in the governing structures of our universities? Is it not universities' duty to ensure that students whose instruction we are charged with will receive the best possible education we can offer them — so that we are only training people for today's jobs, but educating minds to face tomorrow's challenges? These are some of the questions that the passing of the Higher Education and Research Act confronts us with.

IN PRAISE OF EXPERTISE

To thrive, British universities will have to adapt to new ways of being assessed and funded, even as we adapt to new ways of engaging with our international partners. We will also have to face up to one of the greatest challenges to our credibility, and to the public trust that gives us licence to operate.

At the 2017 World Economic Forum, in Davos, the communications company Edelman published the results of its annual Trust Barometer, revealing the largest-ever drop in public trust in the institutions of government, business, media and NGOs.

Trust in conventional institutions, the survey tells us, is at its lowest. More than half (53%) of respondents across the world believed "the system" had failed them; 59% of them claimed to have more trust in search engines than in human content editors when seeking information. The survey tells us that people are now as likely to believe a "person like themselves" as they are to believe an academic expert.

It may come as no surprise that the trust gap between the informed and uninformed public is growing. That gap is at its widest in the US — followed by the UK. Almost half of all respondents in the Trust Barometer believe that facts don't matter.

A particular worry for many of us ahead of the UK's Brexit referendum was the rhetoric surrounding evidence-based arguments, infamously summarized in the phrase "the people of this country have had enough of experts". The dictionary defines an expert as "a person who is very knowledgeable about, or skilful in, a particular area." How strange, then, that this word has now become a term of abuse.

Another poll carried out by Ipsos Mori just before the referendum suggested that Academics were ranked third in trustworthiness as a source of information on EU issues — after friends and family, and small business owners.

Even the perception that universities cannot be trusted to generate knowledge that is pertinent to most people's lives can be profoundly damaging. It is damaging to our reputation as institutions capable of effecting social change. It is damaging to our reputation as institutions interested in improving lives not just at our doorstep, but wherever in the world that improvement is needed. It is damaging to our reputation as institutions that should take a position of leadership on the most important issues of the day.

So we must ask ourselves: what is the role of universities that pride themselves on educating and recruiting experts? What is our role, as purveyors of expertise, at a time when that very expertise is being dismissed as irrelevant?

There is a long and distinguished tradition of anti-intellectualism in the UK and the US. It can be traced back to at least the 18th century, and the writings of Edmund Burke, who praised the English character as being rooted in "common sense" and empiricism. Writing on the history of anti-intellectualism in the United States, American historian Richard Hofstadter claimed that it was "a part of our English cultural inheritance". In Britain, Leonard Woolf observed: "No people have ever despised and distrusted the intellect and intellectuals more than the British."

Common sense is fine, and underpins many of our best ideas. But common sense alone does not help us cure cancer or eradicate infectious disease. Neither does common sense alone help us fight crop failure or mitigate climate change. Common sense in isolation does not help us make cities smarter and more efficient, or combat extremist ideologies, or interpret ancient civilizations and texts. We need the experts to do that. Universities happen to be full of them.

So my challenge to university leaders everywhere is this: let's be self-confident about our mission. Let's continue to achieve excellence in research and education — and alongside it, let's achieve excellence in outreach and communication. Let's continue to innovate, and to challenge conventional wisdom — and while we do that, let's strive to be more transparent, open and diverse. Let's continue to push the boundaries of knowledge — and work hard to demonstrate the many ways in which this knowledge touches lives everywhere.

We must reclaim the mantle of expertise, and make no apologies about it. As long as we can show that we have society's interest at our heart, we will have the legitimacy and the autonomy to keep on doing what we do best. If we wish to remain relevant, we cannot simply hide behind our reputations.

We have a responsibility to engage in discussion with the public. Doing so will not always make us popular, but it will ultimately strengthen our integrity and build up public trust — which is the most precious commodity. From that public trust we derive the licence to continue with our vital work.

FINAL THOUGHTS: REASONS TO BE CHEERFUL?

I began by referring to the policy proposals affecting higher education when I took up the post of Vice-Chancellor in 2010. We are now seeing some of those reforms being finally put into practice through legislation, and confronting universities with serious questions about their purpose.

At a glance, the combination of Brexit, the HERA's comprehensive shakeup of British higher education, and the challenge to our expertise seem to be a perfect storm for British universities. In fact, for institutions prepared to adapt, there may well be opportunities to enhance our reputation for excellence in all areas.

One of the biggest tests ahead lies in having to adjust to — and plan for — a future that is, at the moment, so opaque. We know we can expect increased competition from universities elsewhere. We can expect a different sort of relationship with our European partners, unmediated by the European Union and its funding mechanisms. We can expect greater pressure to be accountable, transparent and open to assessment.

I'd like to believe that ours is a resilient sector. In the face of the uncertainties ahead, and through close engagement with the UK government, we must continue to push for the right balance between regulation and autonomy. Through close collaboration with our partners in Europe and elsewhere, we must step up our efforts to offset the disadvantages of the UK's exit from the EU with the opportunities — financial, regulatory and otherwise — that it presents. And we must ensure that we dispel, categorically, any reservations about the relevance that our expertise has to local, national and global communities.

Only by doing so can we ensure that British universities remain globally competitive in the years ahead. Only by doing so can we ensure that British universities continue to act as society's critics and conscience. Only by doing so can we ensure that British universities continue to carry out their mission to contribute to society.

REFERENCES

THE (2016). "EU students generate £3.7 billion for UK economy, says UUK", *Times Higher Education*, 8 April 2016.