



The All-Party Parliamentary University Group

Tuesday 28 January 2020

18:15-19:30

Committee Room 1, House of Lords

Chair

Daniel Zeichner MP

Speakers

- Professor Julia Buckingham, President, Universities UK
- John Gill, Editor, Times Higher Education
- Viki Cooke, Founding Partner, Britain Thinks
- Rt Hon Chris Skidmore MP, Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation

Professor Julia Buckingham opened the meeting by giving an introduction to Universities UK (UUK), who the group represents and its role within the higher education sector. Her presentation then set out what UUK was expecting from the government and the sector's priorities for 2020 and beyond.

Professor Buckingham referred to the turbulent times universities had recently endured due to Brexit, ministerial changes and introduction of a new regulator. She stated UUK's mission to create the conditions for universities to be the best in the world and maximise their impact locally, nationally and globally.

Recent government commitments to reach the 2.4% of GDP spending target on R&D were welcome, but there was still scope to be more ambitious and ensure additional spending was well distributed across the country.

Professor Buckingham then spoke about the 260,000 domestic and international staff required to deliver this target and the immigration regime needed to attract the latter. She explained how the recent government announcement on changes to the Tier 1 visa and Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) would affect universities.

Moving to the domestic agenda, Professor Buckingham spoke about universities' role delivering opportunity and fairness and where this could be improved. She spoke specifically about UUK's review on admissions, work to tackle the BAME attainment gap and government asks to reintroduce maintenance grants and increase funding for school careers advice.

Universities' wider role in delivering prosperity to the whole of the UK through job creation and innovation was then explored. University provision should be further adapted to allow individuals to up- and re-skill throughout their lives she thought, and collaboration between higher education and further education should be increased. Attendees were told about UUK's work in these areas before Professor Buckingham finished by stressing the importance of ensuring the value of university degrees remained high.

John Gill focused his presentation on some international aspects of higher education policy, namely geopolitics, international students and 'culture wars'.

He opened by stressing the significant extent to which higher education was playing a role in the new era of global politics, giving universities' involvement in the debates around Huawei as an example. John also thought universities across the world had a duty to step up to show the power of collaboration in tackling major issues such as climate change.

Some institutions in Australia and the USA had adopted a more protectionist stance on PhD students accessing information in certain fields of study; he thought data sharing in research was no longer a given.

Turning to international students John gave the statistics that globally over five million students were studying outside of their home country and this number was projected to rise by 30% in the next decade. He thought this was significant in geopolitical terms and then spoke about the importance of visa regimes and post-study work opportunities for countries' attractiveness to international students.

He spoke briefly about culture wars and the tendency to label universities as left wing or liberal-leaning. He argued that there is a role for academics to comment on issues in an expert, non-partisan way which has been forgotten.

Prior to concluding, he also highlighted two important areas he did not have time to discuss in more detail, emphasising that the 'value' of degrees will be an important part of university debates in the next year, and stressing the importance of a good relationship between the universities minister and higher education institutions. He observed that the current minister is a strong supporter of the sector.

Viki Cooke used her presentation to give attendees '10 insights in 10 minutes'. These insights covered a broad spectrum of issues and topics including message cut-through, the mood of the nation and public views on universities.

She explained that the public were bombarded with messages and generally did not have strong opinions on universities. There was a widespread lack of understanding about the role of universities in undertaking research and contributing to local prosperity and, instead, universities were usually seen through the prism of student fees and finance. She observed that the public's enthusiasm for universities increases when they are informed about the range of ways universities impact upon people's lives.

In terms of the wider public feeling, she spoke about the deep seated divisions across the country that manifested themselves in the Brexit vote and the prioritisation of the NHS as a policy concern.

In summary, Viki thought that the higher education sector was a 'sleeping giant' that should better promote its positive impact of communities and society to increase pride in universities and develop more vocal advocates.

Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation Chris Skidmore MP used his presentation to set out what he wanted to achieve during his tenure as universities minister

and reassure attendees of his desire to work with the sector to promote one of the UK's most successful exports.

He stated his personal ambition to secure full association to the next Horizon programme and work towards full association to the next Erasmus programme. He stated that insurance mechanisms are also being worked on, and referred to the Smith-Reid Review into the future of international research collaboration.

The Minister spoke about the government's commitments around research and development (R&D) spending and specifically the importance of research across different disciplines and quality related (QR) funding for fundamental research. The government's desire to reduce bureaucracy for researchers and the Migration Advisory Committee report on salary thresholds were then discussed.

University partnerships across the country and the best way to make different pots of funding more coherent was then spoken about by the Minister before he alluded to the government's proposal for an Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and how that would fit into the existing research ecosystem.

Finally, turning to the broader education sector, the Minister gave his view there could be greater collaboration between further and higher education and thought there was a significant opportunity for universities to get further involved in the current debate around Level 4 and 5 provision.

A Question and Answer session took place following the speakers' presentations.