

## CDBU – a restatement of aims for 2018

Since the Council for the Defence of British Universities (CDBU) was launched in November 2012, the need to defend universities and the academic profession has grown increasingly urgent.

Since that time the broad precept – articulated in the Browne report of 2010 – that competition between institutions tends to enhance their achievements has hardened into the ill-founded dogma that market competition alone will bring about improvements in academic standards. At the same time, the adoption of the principle that the main burden of the cost of university teaching should be borne by students in the form of loans has led to an equally doctrinaire insistence that the students should be viewed as consumers of a product or service, rather than as participants in a learning process that requires mutual respect, reciprocal effort, and the judicious nurturing of intellectual skills by the teachers involved.

Through a series of measures, of which the implementation of the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA)<sup>1</sup> is the key element, a regime has been imposed on English universities in particular that is very insistent about the material *outcomes* to be expected of higher education but shows scant regard for the sensitive nature of the educational processes that generate those outcomes. The terms of the consultation about the functions of the newly established Office for Students that was conducted in the autumn of 2017 – with its explicit references to such matters as senior staff pay, forms of student assessment, and measures taken by campus societies to discourage inflammatory speech-making – are symptomatic of an increasing tendency for government to attempt, not only to regulate the higher education sector, but to police it.

The aims of the CDBU, as they were published in *Times Higher Education* on 8 November 2012<sup>2</sup>, provide a succinct statement of the values and principles to which the CDBU remains committed. They are:

1. To defend and enhance the character of British universities as places where students can develop their capacities to the full, where research and scholarship are pursued at the highest level, and where intellectual activity can be freely conducted without regard to its immediate economic benefit
2. To urge that university education, both undergraduate and postgraduate, be accessible to all students who can benefit from it
3. To maintain the principle that teaching and research are indispensable activities for a university, and that one is not pursued at the expense of the other
4. To ensure that universities, while responding to the needs of students and society in general, should retain ultimate control of the content of the courses taught and the methods of instruction employed. As well as often providing vocational training, university education should equip graduates with the mental skills and intellectual flexibility necessary to meet the demands of a rapidly changing economy. It should develop the powers of the mind, enlarge knowledge and understanding, and enable graduates to lead fuller and more rewarding lives [?Add: to the general benefit of society]
5. To emphasise that, as well as often having vital social and economic applications and being subject to accountability, academic research seeks to enhance our knowledge and understanding of the physical world, of human nature and of all forms of human activity
6. To ensure that methods employed to assess the quality of university research do not encourage premature or unnecessary publication or inhibit the production of major works that require a long period of gestation
7. To safeguard the freedom of academics to teach and to pursue research and enquiry in the directions appropriate to the needs of their subject

---

1

□ See <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted>.

2

□ See also <http://cdbu.org.uk/about/values-and-aims/>.

8. To maintain the principle of institutional autonomy, to encourage academic self-government and to ensure that the function of managerial and administrative staff is to facilitate teaching and research
9. To ensure that British universities continue to transmit and reinterpret the world's cultural and intellectual inheritance, to encourage global exchange and to engage in the independent thought and criticism necessary for the flourishing of any democratic society.

The core principle that these aims are designed to underpin is that the CDBU exists to advance university education for the public benefit.

In the circumstances prevailing in 2018, the main campaigning priorities for the CDBU should be:

- To continue to impress upon the government and the general public the danger that, by encouraging commercial providers to rush in and provide low quality courses, the policies of the current government carry the risk of undermining the excellent international reputation of British higher education
- To press for a fully independent review of the TEF, as required by the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, with a view to minimising the damage that any procedure for “grading” universities is likely to inflict on the actual business of education in universities
- In association with CDBU's campaigning on the TEF and in other connections, to lobby against the precariousness of academic employment, which is itself tending to undermine the attractiveness of an academic career and thus also the future quality of British higher education<sup>3</sup>
- To continue to press the arguments against treating higher education as a consumer good, emphasising instead the nature of university study as a participatory experience and a mutually enriching pursuit of knowledge and understanding by learner and teacher
- To monitor the political debate about tuition fees with a view to encouraging a settlement that provides a reasonable balance between fee levels and public funding of university teaching, accompanied by an adequate level of financial support for students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

### Sir Keith Thomas: Reversal of fortune (THE, 8 November 2012)

Universities must return to teaching and researching what they believe is intrinsically worthwhile, not what is profitable, argues Keith Thomas

Why should I, long retired from active academic life, have become involved with the Council for the Defence of British Universities? The answer is that like many members of my generation, I find much that is repugnant in the treatment of our universities by the present government and its recent predecessors. I think that their policies constitute a serious threat to some crucial academic values and believe that only an organisation such as the Council for the Defence of British Universities, drawing potentially on a mass membership, transcending party political loyalties and unencumbered by affiliation to any particular academic institution, can hope to reverse the trend.

Over the past two to three decades we have seen ever-increasing government regulation of academic life. It is right that in a democratic country the people's representatives should assure themselves that public money is properly spent and that state-funded universities are actively discharging their responsibilities. But the degree of audit and accountability now demanded is excessive, inefficient and hugely wasteful of time and resources. More fundamentally, the very purpose of the university is grossly distorted by the attempt to create a market in higher education. Students are regarded as “consumers” and encouraged to invest in the degree course they think most likely to enhance their earning prospects. Academics are seen as

---

3

□ This point was strongly argue in the CDBU's response to the government's consultation on behalf of the Office for Students, which can be downloaded here: <http://cdbu.org.uk>.

“producers”, whose research is expected to focus on topics of commercial value and whose “output” is measured against a single scale and graded like sacks of wheat. The universities themselves are encouraged to teach and research not what they think is intrinsically worthwhile but what is likely to be financially most profitable. Instead of regarding each other as allies in a common enterprise, they are forced to become commercial competitors.

In the face of this onslaught, university leaders have, for the most part, been remarkably supine. There are obvious reasons for this. The differences in the funding regimes prevailing in the four parts of the UK, and the heterogeneity of the 140 or so institutions that now bear the name “university”, make it virtually impossible to present a united front. Vice-chancellors, whose concerns are overwhelmingly financial, are understandably nervous about alienating their paymasters by stepping out of line. Their usual reaction to any new measure, however damaging, is not to oppose it but to ask how it can best be turned to local advantage. The research excellence framework, for example, has some notoriously undesirable features. But because it seems likely to bring them more money, the heads of the leading “research universities” will support it, regardless of its intellectual consequences. The others, like unsuccessful football clubs, set about buying in scholarly “stars” from elsewhere to compete in the REF. They also encourage their academic staff to direct their energies away from teaching into cobbling together research projects, the main object of which is less to advance their subject than to secure outside funding. It is revealing that in recruiting its founding members, the council has found that current vice-chancellors are reluctant to get involved whereas former university leaders sign up with alacrity.

Meanwhile, deep dissatisfaction pervades the university sector. Its primary cause is not the lack of adequate funding, for it is appreciated that higher education is expensive and times are hard. Rather, it arises from the feeling that an understandable concern to improve the nation’s economic performance, coupled with an ideological faith in the virtues of the market, has meant that the central values of the university are being sidelined or forgotten. A university education should assist students to develop their intellectual and critical capacities to the full - that is a good in itself, but it will also give them the transferable skills that will be essential in an uncertain future. Scientists and scholars should be permitted to pursue knowledge and understanding of the physical and human world in which we live and to do so for their own sake, regardless of commercial value. Out of such free enquiry comes a broader, moral concern for nature and humanity, standing in total contrast to market values. The task of the council is not just to challenge a series of short-term political expedients: it must also combat a whole philosophy.

That philosophy is symbolised by the transfer of responsibility for the universities from the Department for Education to the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. It is also reflected in the authoritarian managerial structures and expanding bureaucracies that are such a feature of the modern university. In reaction to the huge increase in the number, power and pay of university administrators, I hope that the Council for the Defence of British Universities will urge the introduction of a more collegial and democratic way of doing things. The tradition of academic self-government is a very old one. Is it utopian to hope that it might replace the business-corporation model?

The council will have no shortage of immediate issues on which to focus. I hope that it will press for the replacement of the present higher education funding councils - which are tools of government lacking intellectual and moral independence - by autonomous intermediate bodies, which, like the old University Grants Committee, can command respect by acting as buffers between the universities and the politicians.

I also hope that the council will campaign for the research councils to be freed from government pressure. They should become less proactive in deciding the direction of research and revert to the responsive mode as their normal way of proceeding. Scientists and scholars, not politicians and bureaucrats, are the persons best qualified to determine the direction that intellectual enquiry should take.

Government regulation of what is to be taught at universities has also had unfortunate effects. I am sceptical about the merits of protecting the STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) while allowing the range and content of courses in the humanities and social sciences to be determined by the market preferences of 18-year-olds. Where will the study of Chinese, Russian, German or even French be in 20 years if their fate is left to the market? Yet all are as essential for our economic future as for our understanding of other cultures.

The Council for the Defence of British Universities will inevitably be a broad church whose members will have different preoccupations. But they will be united in their desire to arrive at a more appropriate relationship between universities and government and to reaffirm the central objectives of academic life.

The council should not be backward-looking. Its aim must be to show how old values can be best realised in new circumstances. The task will involve discussion, investigation and self-criticism. In some respects universities must put their own houses in order, most obviously by paying more attention to students. The emphasis on research has often led to the disparagement of teaching - and the energy devoted to recruiting revenue-producing foreign students has not always been matched by the care they receive once they arrive. British universities are a precious feature of our national life and enjoy a high international reputation. They should not be imperilled by misconceived government policies, however well-intentioned. When the Council for the Defence of British Universities is launched next week, I hope that its membership will rapidly extend beyond academics and students to include alumni, parents of students and everyone who values the supremely human activities of teaching and learning, the pursuit of knowledge and the life of the mind.

## **Martin Rees: Parable of the talent (THE, 8 November 2012)**

**Politicians, bean counters, impact assessors, be warned: if the UK academy cannot offer the world's best minds freedom of expression and space to think, it will decline and fall, argues Martin Rees**

Fifty years ago, the Robbins report on higher education - a manifesto for UK university expansion, written with a literacy and depth sadly lacking in its later counterparts - offered an articulate vision appropriate to that era. Today, higher education has hugely expanded, but some things have not changed. It is still a public good as well as a private benefit for our brightest young people to receive a rigorous education - indeed, it is more crucial than ever to our nation's future. But current upheavals risk jeopardising the quality of our universities - and once quality falls, it will be near impossible to restore, especially because we are networked in a worldwide system on which other countries are strengthening their grip. The reports in the foreign press about what is happening here are already proving a disincentive to international recruitment of students and faculty.

Now that our higher education system has grown, I believe there should be a more diverse "ecology" of institutions, with more flexibility, more collaboration and more transferability between them: we can learn from the US in this respect, as well as from the best UK models (including, in particular, [The Open University](#)). But the Council for the Defence of British Universities will (rightly) raise an alarm about the changes that may erode quality and create disruption that could foreclose rather than facilitate necessary reforms. Universities have become a political football.

The government's mantra is that the "money follows the student". But is it clear that the market-driven choices of financially pressured students will drive up teaching standards and raise levels of rigour and achievement rather than favouring "soft" and cheap options? Choosing a university is a key life choice - it is not like choosing a restaurant meal. Moreover, the current system is anything but a free market: fees are, in practice, narrowly constrained; there are quotas (inconstantly applied); and the degree of central regulation, plus the strings attached to public funding through the funding councils and the research councils, erode autonomy and increase the administrative overhead in all universities.

The current incentive system underrates something that is surely part of the academic remit: broad learning and scholarship. Robbins stated that the academic had three duties: teaching, research and "reflective enquiry". "Reflective enquiry" has been squeezed out - but it is important for its own sake, as well as for the way it enriches teaching and research.

When academics bemoan the "managerial" and "instrumental" view of education that dominates today, they risk being accused of an ivory tower arrogance that disregards their obligations to the public. But we should strongly counter such allegations. My academic colleagues are strongly committed to teaching and the welfare of their students, working often with obsessive energy on their research - and their choices of research project are anything but frivolous: what is at stake is a big chunk of their lives and their professional reputation. They are frustrated that their professional efforts are being increasingly encumbered by regulation and administrative constraints.

In both science and the arts, confidence and high morale are crucial drivers of creative achievement. The best university departments foster such an atmosphere, and I am lucky to have spent many years in one in the [University of Cambridge](#). But even there, morale is falling. Coffee-time conversations are less about

ideas and more about grants, the research excellence framework, job security and suchlike. Prospects of sustaining excellence will plummet if such concerns prey unduly on the minds of even the best young academics.

It is by attracting and motivating talented individuals - and letting them back their own judgement - that funding agencies would best sustain high-quality universities and optimise the prospects for “impactful” discoveries.

The winners of the Nobel Prize in Physics 2010, Andre Geim and Kostya Novoselov, are important exemplars. Working at the [University of Manchester](#), they discovered a new material, graphene, with extraordinary strength and electrical properties - and the potential to trigger a transformative technology. Their clinching experiment involved a piece of Sellotape. It was archetypal “small science” - and it needed intellectual freedom, time and the supportive environment that Manchester provided. These two men, both Russians, came to this country in the 1990s. We must welcome and nurture such people and ensure that the UK is still perceived as a place where the best cutting-edge research can be done.

Any researcher is surely delighted if their work has a social or economic impact outside academia, but it is not always recognised how unpredictable, diffuse and long term such outcomes are. For example, the inventors of lasers in the 1960s used ideas that Albert Einstein developed 40 years earlier, and could not foresee that their invention would be used in eye surgery and in DVDs decades later. So there is justified scepticism about attempts to assess impact in a way that is “fine-grained” and short term enough to be used as a determinant of funding allocations. It is even less feasible to assess impact before the research is done - but the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council enjoins even first-time grant applicants to “clearly identify the national importance of their research over a 10-50 year time-frame”!

A few universities attract the lion’s share of research funding and have strong graduate schools spanning all faculties. But despite the trend towards concentration, it is crucial to avoid formalising the hierarchy and to retain a system that allows excellence (and new graduate schools) to sprout anywhere in the system.

The University of Leicester (where I am a visiting professor) is world-class in genetics and in space science. That was not planned. Outstanding young researchers in these two fields happened to have jobs there and had the enterprise to build up major research groups. The system that prevailed in the 1970s allowed this to happen. And one could quote other examples where groups that are now well-established owed their impetus to one or two individuals. Selectivity should not become so tight that such opportunities are choked off.

Our universities are among the all-too-few institutions in the UK (the BBC is another) that are widely admired and worth protecting. We can surely afford to sustain them: we cannot afford not to. Morale and optimism are crucial. We are competing worldwide for faculty and students. There is a genuine risk of a downward spiral if talent cannot be attracted or retained. The Council for the Defence of British Universities should proclaim these concerns and urge that any restructuring is carefully planned and implemented.