

29 May 2024

Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
The Prime Minister  
10 Downing Street  
London  
SW1A 2AA

By email

Dear Prime Minister,

I am writing, as the President of the British Academy, the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, to set out the serious situation facing the higher education sector in this country and the significance of this for the UK's future resilience and prosperity. I also attach the British Academy's manifesto in which we outline the ways in which the Government can use the evidence and insights from across the humanities and social sciences to address the challenges the UK must address. As this is a cross-government issue I am copying this letter to Ministers from wider departments.

As you know from the work you led on securing association to Horizon Europe, the UK has an enviable and long-held global reputation for research. In 2024, four of our universities were ranked among the top 10 leading universities globally and we are the fourth largest producer of research in the world. The arts, humanities and social sciences have been the envy of the world, previously winning over a third of all funding available from the European Research Council.

The knowledge, insight and skills from these subject areas power sectors in which we are a global leader and on which our economy depends - such as the creative industries, financial and legal services. The Higher Education sector itself supports more than three quarters of a million jobs and contributes £130bn to the economy.

Research powers breakthroughs and changes lives; the Covid-19 vaccine being a recent example where a cross-disciplinary approach was vital to its success. The humanities and social sciences are crucial partners in finding solutions to the great issues that we face as a society, such as the climate crisis, post-pandemic public health and the responsible design and use of Artificial Intelligence. In our conflicted world, there is a pressing need for deep understanding of cultures, histories, geographies, languages, institutions, economies, behaviours, laws and beliefs. These subjects also underpin the creative industries, which is one of the Government's priority sectors.

But our ability to remain world-leading, to drive economic growth and to tackle grand challenges hangs in the balance.

UK universities – big and small, old and new – are cutting courses and departments in all subjects but particularly in the arts and humanities. The consequences of this are not just global and national as I have set out, but have a significant impact in our towns and cities, too, hitting communities, business and families. It also restricts social mobility, limiting student choice for those unable to travel from their area.

A healthy, diverse higher education sector with a global outlook is in everyone's interest including many of your Cabinet colleagues. However there is no single Government Department responsible for the sector as a whole. We urge you to include in your manifesto, commitments to work urgently towards the following goals:

*A sustainable funding base for research and higher education:*

We recognise the commitment this Government has made to funding for research. However, this is only one part of a university's finances. We need a sustainable funding model for universities as a whole that enables research and teaching in a wide breadth of subjects, is resilient to regional inequalities in provision and addresses the impact of a real-term cut in tuition fee income since 2018 and recent inflationary pressures.

*A coordinated policy on universities which enables them to contribute to the UK's prosperity:*

We need an urgent review and thorough overhaul of the way government engages with universities, and a cross-government, coherent and coordinated policy for the university sector including a robust, independent regulator responsible for the system as a whole.

*A supportive immigration system:*

We have been concerned about recent visa policy changes and increased visa costs. We need a coherent immigration policy which recognises that a key strength of our universities' research and teaching, as well as their funding, comes from their international character.

The consequences of inaction may not be felt for many years ahead but are so wide-reaching that it is incumbent that action is taken now. As the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences, we have evidence and insight to support you and stand ready to help.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,



Professor Julia Black CBE PBA  
President

*Cc Secretary of State for DSIT, Secretary of State for DCMS, Secretary of State for DFE and Home Secretary*