

Opinion **UK universities**

## Britain's universities are assets, not a problem to be solved

We should learn to cherish our researchers the way we do our athletes and actors

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Louise Richardson FEBRUARY 23, 2018

Listening to the public discourse one could be forgiven for thinking that the British higher education system is a failure. It is not. It is the envy of the world.

According to the Times Higher Education [world university rankings](#), the UK has three of the top 10 [universities](#) in the world and seven of the top 10 universities in [Europe](#). We have 12 of the top 100 universities in the world and 31 of the top 100 universities in Europe.

I cannot think of a single sector of the economy, or of British social or cultural life, in which we do so well. We delight in the success of our athletes at the Olympic Games and root for British films and actors at the Oscars, yet we seem to treat universities as a problem — even though every day our researchers enhance our understanding of the universe, search for cures for diseases and help us to comprehend the world around us.

At a time when university staff and lecturers face cuts to their pension benefits, and when institutions fear the effects of Brexit on research while also facing a potential overhaul of their [funding model](#), it is worth remembering what we do well.

Universities are engines of social mobility, drivers of the economy and generators of new ideas.

Theresa May, the prime minister, admirably identified social mobility as one of her priorities when she took office in 2016. Universities play an integral role in fostering it. The introduction of income-contingent loans has not had the effect many feared of reducing the number of disadvantaged students going on to higher education. On the contrary, English universities are educating more students than ever before and more are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds than ever before. A student from a deprived background is 83 per cent more likely to attend university today than they were in 2006. This should be a cause for celebration.

There are deep socio-economic, regional and ethnic inequalities in British society. Universities reflect them, and cannot eliminate them on their own. But they can be part of the solution. The figures are stark. According to the [Social Mobility Commission](#), a child living in one of England's most disadvantaged areas is 27 times more likely to go to an inadequate school than a child living in one of the least disadvantaged. Recent data from [UCAS](#), the university admissions body, show the number of people from the most advantaged postcodes are 14 times more likely to achieve three A grades or better at A-level than those from the least advantaged areas. The top eight schools in England produce the same number of students gaining eight A\* grades or better at GCSE as the bottom 1,500 schools.

Ethnic differences are stark, too. In 2012-13, according to figures from the Higher Education Statistics Agency, one in 20 black students received three A or A\* grades at A level, one in 10 white students, one in four Chinese students and one in eight overall. We need to understand what lies behind these differences. Only then will we be able to mitigate them.

Regional differences are also striking. Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire together produce almost twice as many students gaining three A\* grades (1,352) as the entire north-east of England (734). Most sobering, perhaps, is that the Social Market Foundation, a think-tank, found that for a child born in 2000, where they live is a more powerful predictor of academic success than it was for children born in 1970.

Oxford is often criticised for not admitting more poor, [ethnic minority](#) and regional students. We invest £17.2m a year trying to do so. The pace is slow and the numbers

are low, but the trajectory is clear: the percentage of students admitted from the two most economically disadvantaged groups has increased from 6.8 per cent to 10.6 per cent in five years. The number of students from the two most educationally disadvantaged areas has increased from 9.5 per cent to 12.7 per cent. We have found that the most successful way to recruit smart students from non-traditional backgrounds is to bring them to Oxford, where they invariably discover, usually to their surprise, that other students are “normal”.

These are uncertain times for the British economy, but universities such as Oxford can help. Oxford's annual operating budget is £2.2bn. It supports more than 50,000 jobs, generates £2.3bn a year for the local economy, over £5bn for the British economy and more than £7bn globally. When the university recently went to the markets for a £750m [100-year bond](#), it attracted £2.8bn in potential investment, a striking statement of confidence in the enduring value of the education it offers.

Mrs May has in the past talked of an ambitious industrial strategy for Britain. One of the barriers to this is the skills gap. But this will not be overcome by insisting that every university offers apprenticeships. The UK has a large and diverse higher and further education sector. What we need is more clarity of purpose about what different kinds of institutions do best. The example of Germany is often invoked, but I doubt one will find that great German technical colleges are being asked to become centres for the humanities.

It often feels to those of us who work in higher education that universities are being used as a political football in a battle for the youth vote. But they are too important for that. Institutions such as Oxford are accustomed to political turmoil — after all, we backed the losing side in the civil war, and endured visitations and burnings at the stake. Universities today can help lead the country through this time of political uncertainty and fiscal constraint. Political parties should see them as their allies, not their whipping boys.

*The writer is vice-chancellor of the University of Oxford*

## Letter in response to this article:

[\*The fall in part-time student numbers is cause for concern / From Peter Horrocks, Vice-Chancellor, The Open University, The Open University, Milton Keynes, UK\*](#)

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