

Remodelling universities

I would like our universities to be independent institutions dedicated to rigorous thinking, a tolerant exploration of a range of viewpoints, and fearless enquiry.

I favour more reliance on the Endowment model of funding. The more money universities can receive from legacies and donations, the more independence they can enjoy. Too many run on business models which depend on government grants, or on the goodwill of some categories of student who may also bring with them foreign government intervention.

Some Universities and Colleges have done a good job raising long term investment money, and some have done a good job investing it. Others can take more advantage of the very favourable tax status they enjoy. Gifts and legacies are tax free. Endowment funds pay no CGT, Income Tax or Stamp Duty. These are huge and valuable concessions.

Others have become very dependent on state grants. The danger of this is it can reinforce group think. The insiders from research faculties sit on Whitehall Committees to define the areas of interest and the people who will receive research funding. Fashionable preoccupations dominate at the expense of other sometimes more important questions to improve peoples lives. Solutions are often limited by conventional wisdom and can be distorted by professional jealousies. The whole system is open to the tyranny of the established.

At last Universities UK is talking about the dangers of Chinese influence. Chinese students have come in large numbers. They have a different relationship to their state and government to that of Western students. They wish to assist a large transfer of knowledge and IP to their country. Some universities need to be careful not to undersell our Knowledge and not to release or open up research with defence or strategic network implications through a casual disregard for what is going on.

Undergraduate programmes should be built around educating U.K. students. Post graduate research programmes can benefit from close exchanges with academics from like minded democracies. Second degree programmes may well be a good business line to establish links with students from anywhere in the world, where our educational excellence is something to share so they learn and we earn from the experience. These should not entail joint working on pioneering areas with strategic implications for our defence or economy.