James Weinstein:

Good evening. I’m Jim Weinstein of the Sandra Day O’Connor College of Law at Arizona State University. Together with John Marenbon and Simon Blackburn, both of Trinity College, Cambridge, I am an organizer of an interdisciplinary conference that will seek to identify and examine threats to the core mission of the university, humanities, and science. The event this evening is the opening session of this conference, which will continue for the next two and a half days at Cambridge in a series of invited workshop sessions.

Tonight’s event is entitled “The Humanities Under Threat?” My inflexion just now tried to indicate the question mark at the end of this title, for in the best of academic traditions, we have indeed posed a question.

Now it has become de rigueur to describe speakers at academic events as distinguished or even as most distinguished. So we need another term, I think, to accurately describe the panel of luminaries assembled to speak to us tonight.
To introduce this most luminous panel and to chair tonight’s discussion is the renowned philosopher and public intellectual, Simon Blackburn.

**Simon Blackburn:**

Thank you very much, Jim. It’s a great privilege to be taking part in this event, although I hope that you won’t be hearing very much from me. But you will be hearing from the distinguished panel on my right, and I’ll introduce them in alphabetical order, which is also the order in which they’re going to speak. And they start next to me with Jonathan Cole, who is the former Provost and Dean of Faculties of Columbia University and also author of *The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, and Why It Must be Protected.*

Stefan Collini is professor of English literature at the University of Cambridge and the author of *Absent Minds: Intellectuals in Britain.* Michael Crow is President of Arizona State University and the architect of a New American University. He’s also founder of the Center for Science, Policy, and Outcomes, in Washington, D.C. Martin Rees is former President of the Royal Society and the Master of Trinity College Cambridge. Appointed to the House of Lords in 2005, in 2010, he gave the BBC’s Reith lectures, now published as *From Here to Infinity: Scientific Horizons.*
Adam Roberts is the President of the British Academy, elected to that position in 2009. He is the senior research fellow in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Oxford University and an American Fellow of Balliol College. He is particularly interested in civil resistance and power politics; so perhaps just as well that David Willetts is not here, when there was some possibility that he was going to be. So without more ado, I’d like you to welcome our extraordinarily distinguished panel and I’ll invite Jonathan Cole to kick off tonight’s talks.

Jonathan Cole:

Thank you very much, and it’s very good to be back in England and to be part of this conference. As leadoff speaker of the conference, let me try to very briefly supply some context for the themes of the meetings that we will be holding, while also saying perhaps a few things in general about the humanities in particular. When most educated Americans, and I dare say probably people in Britain, think about great universities—and here I’m talking for example in the United States of perhaps 120 out of 4,800 colleges and universities—they don’t think that lasers, FM radio, magnetic resonance imaging, global positioning systems, bar codes, the Richter Scale, Buckyballs, nanotechnology, the nicotine patch, the origin of computers, the discovery of the insulin gene, even the electric toothbrush, Gatorade, the Heimlich maneuver, and Viagra had their origins at our great universities.
Most people who are educated think of universities in terms of undergraduate education and professional education and, indeed, that makes a great deal of sense. Since from their point of view, they’re concerned about the education of their children, their grandchildren, or they relate to their own educational experiences, which were generally at the professional or undergraduate level. Now I don’t want to in any way dismiss the extraordinary importance of undergraduate education, but I do want to make the case, as I try to make in the book, that what makes American universities dominate the world’s greatest universities—and I think Britain is a very close second, having terrific universities—is the world of discovery and research. These universities are engines of innovation and increasingly will be the engine of innovation if allowed to be in the twenty-first century.

Now there’s an awful lot of data that I could point to but don’t really have the time to discuss that would confirm this idea. But remember that until January 1933, when Hitler came to power, the German university system dominated the receipt of Nobel Prizes and, in many ways, was considered the greatest system of higher learning in the world. The German system of higher learning proved a rather fragile one. Within months, Hitler’s regime had virtually destroyed it. In the United States, the institutionalization of a set of core values, which are critical for greatness, were put in place by the 1930s. In the United States, the great
universities, are rather young institutions. We tend to think of them as older institutions. You have still older ones here in the Britain, of course, much older. Harvard dates back to 1636, but in truth the major universities began with the opening of the doors of Johns Hopkins in the United States in 1876, a hundred years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Now what was it that made these institutions preeminent? I think it was a combination of core values, which began really with seventeenth-century science in England. Many of those values came all the way down from the Enlightenment and became part of university life. Enlightened and bold leadership, very high levels of autonomy from the state, which was extremely important, and very strong belief in competition among universities for the best students and the best faculty. A tremendously enlightened, perhaps the most enlightened, piece of science policy ever produced, which was written after the Second World War, is Vannevar Bush’s *Science: The Endless Frontier*. This is really worth rereading or reading if you haven’t read it before. Nonetheless, these universities are fragile institutions, which as we saw in Germany, can fall as rapidly as they can rise.

In the United States, we’re faced with a bit of a paradox, aren’t we? We have the greatest universities in the world. They are engines of innovation. They provide avenues for upward social ability for young people and improve our stock of
human capital. We’re the envy of the world and students and scholars and scientists want more than anything else to come to the United States—and I would say Britain is a close second—to learn, teach, and do research in our institutions of higher learning. Yet we have this sense of a system of higher learning that is deeply challenged and troubled if not in crisis. We can enumerate a lengthy list of problems and challenges, and I want to do that in a strict sense of enumeration because I don’t have time to do anything else at the moment, but I hope that we can discuss some of these things during the discussion period.

When we think about challenges that we face, most people tend to think about global challenges. They think about challenges from China, challenges potentially from India and other nations. I think that that is a misguided sense of fear for the following reasons. It would not be a bad thing, in fact, if Chinese universities got significantly better. There are no Chinese universities in the top 200. They would like nothing better than to win Nobel Prizes and to be among the very best in the world. The same is true obviously with Japanese universities, although they have a few extraordinary ones, and in Korea and India today as well.

I do believe that if we expanded the pool, we would be better off in many ways because we would be increasing the probabilities that the growth of knowledge
would increase, and we would solve global problems of great importance. So while the United States might actually have less of a high percentage of the great universities, the overall system of universities in the world would be improved.

I don’t think there’s any real threat from China in the next fifteen to twenty years or from some of these other places. Even if China or India were able to create great universities within the next decade or two, it would be good for the global system of higher learning – more important discoveries would be made from the sum of all of these great institutions. But remember, it is not easy to create greatness and once it is allowed to deteriorate, it is extremely difficult and costly to recreate. Today, there is not one German university ranked in the top fifty. There are good reasons, which I’d be happy to go into later, as to why European universities are, in many ways, ossified institutions and are not performing up to what they are capable of.

If the problem is not foreign competition, then what is it? I like to paraphrase Walt Kelly who was a cartoonist that some of you may be familiar with, who had a character named Pogo who, paraphrasing again, says, “The enemy is us.” And if the enemy is us, what are the kinds of challenges that we face? First of all, I think that there are assaults in the United States on academic freedom and free inquiry and the form that it takes more today than ever before has been on research and trying to limit research, trying to legislate certain kinds of acts that take scientists away from doing certain kinds of research, like immunology. The
U.S. Patriot Act and the Public Health Security Bioterrorism Preparedness Acts that followed 2001 are deeply problematic, and I must say that President Obama has done nothing, actually, to change those laws.

We have increasingly restrictive visa policies that are threats to American preeminence because we depend increasingly on the flow of talent from other places in the world since we’re not creating in our K-12 system the kinds of scientists and other scholars that we need for our system. There is increasingly prior review and potential restraint on publication of American articles in scientific journals, and there is increased surveillance of students and faculty through libraries and computer files and searches. There has also been a form of anti-intellectualism that has affected American universities. The kind of political science that I’m talking about represents efforts to impose ideological positions on embryonic stem cell research, global climate change research, reproductive health research, among other areas of scientific work.

It seems to me that the partnership between our universities, government, and industry, which works so well to produce an extraordinary system, needs to be rethought because the consequences of it, at the moment, are in many ways negative. Despite a doubling of the NIH budget, for example, biomedical scientists don’t actually start their own laboratory until they’re 43 years old on average.
We have to worry about the commercialization of intellectual property despite the fact that we favored the idea of universities holding the rights to patents and intellectual property; we have to be worried about the abuse of that right by people who make discoveries or are involved with pharmaceutical industries too closely and who are abusing the rights that they have. An example of such abuse would be having students do work on topics that might have financial payoff rather than on the most important intellectual projects.

There’s a tremendous amount that Mike Crow can say about, and others here, who are better informed than I am about the dismantling of the public education system in the United States. The public educational systems have educated youngsters in their states for certain purposes, and they operated to provide social mobility. Increasingly, these are simply state-located universities with limited support from the state. I believe that Arizona State, as Mike can confirm, receives only 17 percent of its entire budget from the State of Arizona, and that’s a little higher than the state funding in 2011 for the University of California. This has an enormous impact at the margins of university budgets.

So what should universities be looking to do? First of all, we need to stop the disinvestment in higher education—though my guess is that this is just a temporary problem. Then, we have to begin to think of investments in higher
education as part of the mandatory federal and state budgets rather than as part of the discretionary budget, but it’s very difficult to convince members of the U.S. Congress or state legislators of the value of this idea. I think we’re going to have to change the core structure of universities in which we’re going to have to use modern technology, and we’re going to have to move from an extraordinarily competitive system to one that continues to be competitive but also has many more cooperative strategies. So I can imagine, for example, us having rather than football leagues in the United States or sports leagues in the United Kingdom having intellectual leagues where we join departments. We actually join schools, and we allow a much freer flow of faculty and students between and among these schools.

Within universities, I think we’re increasingly going to have to have universities without borders. That is to say, people will have to be able—faculty will have to be able to move much more freely between parts of the universities, and we’re going to have to move away from the idea of silos and disciplines. Not that disciplines are not important, and not that the new foreign languages (which refers to learning the languages of disciplines other than one’s own) aren’t important. This will allow us to engage extremely difficult intellectual problems, where we will need the expertise of people in many disciplines. Finally, there is an open question in the United States of whether or not we should have more institutional differentiation—whether we really need so many “full-service”
university that all look alike, or whether we ought to have great universities that emphasize different forms of scholarship and science.

Since I have little time remaining, I would like to spend it saying just a couple of things about the humanities here. I personally do not think that the humanities are in crisis, although the proportion of people who take humanities courses has certain declined in the United States. In fact, I think that in certain ways some of the crises of the 1970s and eighties are being resolved through shifts in the way in which humanities treat these subject matters. They’ve changed in terms of the orientation of these disciplines. There are fewer people, perhaps, who are taking these courses, but I don’t think that they are about to disappear. I think it is extremely important for us to recognize that for students, especially in the United States, where liberal arts education predominates, that the humanities are a central part of the university. In fact, it seems to me that there is, perhaps ironically, no part of the sciences that shouldn’t involve the humanities.

If you think about the emergence of nanotechnology and the possibilities of nanotechnology, there are all kinds of unusually important ethical and moral questions that are associated with how one uses that knowledge that requires the expertise of humanists. So while I believe in the humanities for their intrinsic value—I mean, it just is enjoyable to read wonderful novels of Jane Austen and Herman Melville—I think that the humanists will at the end of the day play an
increasingly important role in the sciences and the social sciences. They also will remain the essential and boldest internal critics of the university. They are the ones who will question the norms; will question ways that the university is doing things and question whether or not there ought to be very substantial changes in the structure and social relationships within the university.

So in short, I think that—and I hope we’ll have more opportunity to talk about this—that while the humanities are serving fewer people at the university, we ought to be, as leaders, responsible for redirecting these students to the humanities for what they actually give them. Employers continually say that they want people who have analytic skills, who have critical reasoning skills, and who can write well. And that is more likely to come from liberal arts, humanities majors in English, philosophy, art history, and language and literature courses than from undergraduate business school programs.

There are enormous changes underway at our universities, not least of which is caused by the rapid advances in technology—as is so often the case—despite the fact that Britain and the United States represent today the best of what exists. But we live in an evolving environment. If we fail to adapt to a changing society and the larger environments in which universities are embedded, then I think that we
are at risk of falling from preeminence – remaining good but not reaching our full potential. Thank you. ¹

Stefan Collini:

Good evening everybody. In contrast to Jonathan’s admirably cosmopolitan and historical perspective, I’m going to interpret my brief to be to take a determinedly parochial view, looking very much at the present and at two features of the situation in Britain. I do want to begin, though, just by voicing a couple of reservations about the title of our panel, which as you see, is ‘The Humanities Under Threat’’. First, I think it is, in most contexts, a mistake to risk reviving some outdated and misleading notion of ‘the two cultures’: on most of the large questions facing British universities all these disciplines have a common interest and should endeavour wherever possible to speak with a common voice. And second, to speak of the humanities as being ‘under threat’ does risk putting us needlessly on the defensive. I’ll come back in a moment to the way such defensiveness may weaken, rather than strengthen, the case we need to make for the interest and significance of our disciplines, but at this stage I would just say that we should not fall into the lazy and self-dramatising habit of representing every change in official policy as being hostile to the humanities. Despite what

¹ For a fuller discussion of the ideas expressed in this talk, see Jonathan R. Cole, The Great American University: Its Rise to Preeminence, Its Indispensable National Role, Why It Must Be Protected (Public Affairs, 2009).
you may expect, I am not going to focus on the new fee arrangements outlined in the recent White Paper. Though I think that this is a fundamentally misguided policy, I do not actually believe, unlike some critics, that it singles out the humanities for deliberately severe treatment nor that they will necessarily suffer more than some other disciplines in the natural and social sciences.

Instead, I shall identify two less obvious developments which I believe are having or are likely to have a damaging effect on the humanities in this country. The first of these arises from the way in which governments and, following their lead, public debate more generally, approach the question of justification. (I say ‘governments’ in the plural by the way, since in this case this is not something peculiar to the present coalition government but a development vigorously pursued by its predecessor as well.)

In a market democracy such as ours, politicians are acutely conscious of the kinds of justification for public expenditure which it believes the electorate will find acceptable. At present, the received wisdom in the policy-making world is that the only criterion with undisputed legitimacy across the board is contributing to economic prosperity. When decisions have to be made among competing claims, it is now assumed that only by quantifying the economic consequences of one policy option can it have a chance of withstanding the
claims of other options, the alleged benefits of which will in turn be cast in such economic terms.

Clearly, this framework of assumptions does not favour the kinds of activities that are characteristic of, and to some extent distinctive of, universities, and so an effort is made - this academy, among others, has made such an effort - to try to show that goods which we pursue for various, partly intrinsic, purposes can justify their claim on the public purse by being shown to make a significant contribution to GDP in indirect ways.

It would go far beyond my, or anyone’s, brief here to attempt to take issue with the dominant vocabulary of current public debate. My point this evening is that the danger arises when the language of justification is carried over to become a criterion of quality. Once we back ourselves into the corner of saying that we pursue our intellectual activities because they contribute to economic prosperity, it then becomes fatally easy to conclude that those activities which do this most successfully must be the most valuable.

I am going to take as my example of this general problem the requirement in the new Research Excellence Framework to demonstrate that research has a certain, rather narrowly-defined, kind of impact. I make no apology for returning to this example: I realise that there are those who think there is now no point in trying
to identify the defects of this policy and that continuing to talk about it merely reveals one’s lack of political realism. However, I believe that even now, and even among academics, the deleterious long-term effects of this policy are still not well understood, and those effects may be at their most damaging in the case of the humanities.

What has happened in the case of this requirement is that the felt need to use the language of economic and social benefits to *justify* public support for academic research has been clumsily converted into a measure of the *quality* of that research. Work by individuals and departments that can demonstrate that it has certain kinds of economic and social benefits will be more highly rated than comparable research that does not have those particular effects (and will, of course, also be more highly rewarded). It is already evident - and I speak here as someone who has been involved indirectly with the pilot exercise which trialled this policy and as the person responsible for preparing my department’s submission over the next few years - it is already clear that this requirement is causing some scholars to undertake one kind of work rather than another, not because of its greater intellectual or scholarly significance, but because it will be more likely to be convertible into those kinds of activity outside universities that the exercise now rewards. Indeed, advertisements for some academic posts, always a barometer of received professional expectations, now specify that work that can be submitted as an impact case will be a *pre-requisite* of appointment.
This may be an unintended consequence of a policy which has been adopted for other reasons or it may be the effect intended by those who make and administer the policy. But it is already becoming clear that the effect in the humanities is not to stimulate work of the highest intellectual quality. Rather, it incentivises the kind of scholarship that appears to lend itself most readily to certain kinds of media or policy uptake, and the criteria for success in these matters include various adventitious, and sometimes downright meretricious, qualities that can obstruct or detract from enquiry into more intellectually significant topics.

Let me be clear. There are situations in which it is of course entirely legitimate to ask what the value is of an activity that claims support from the public purse, but then those who make that request have to recognise that there can be no single or over-riding criterion of value. The current version of the impact requirement is a category mistake, and there would be no loss of democratic accountability if it were dropped and we concentrated on trying to judge the quality of academic scholarship and research in properly intellectual and educational terms. Indeed, if research in the humanities is valuable to society, as I certainly believe it is, it makes its contribution by extending and deepening our understanding or ourselves and our world, and if we divert our energies from doing that to the highest possible standard in order to meet this new requirement we are in fact lessening the social contribution of scholarly research.
My second point this evening concerns the ways in which the humanities suffer if they are forced into arrangements which have been devised principally with the other activities in mind. My example here is what I shall call, provocatively, the tyranny of outside funding. All of us here, I’m sure, are familiar with this: not only are academics under considerable pressure to apply for funding from bodies external to their own university, but departments that do this successfully are then doubly rewarded with increased internal funding, too.

But a great deal of the most valuable research in the humanities does not require external funding of this kind. The injunction to obtain external funding is, essentially, *an injunction to incur expense*. But research in the humanities does not naturally take the form of a project, requiring research assistants, tied PhD students, frequent conferences, administrative help, and a so-called innovative methodology. It more often takes the form of doing a lot of reading and thinking about something which has, in outline, long been familiar. It principally requires a stimulating intellectual and scholarly environment, a good library, and time. Of course, there can be worthwhile projects in the humanities - large editorial projects or archaeological excavations, for example - for which it is appropriate to seek funding to cover collective costs, but in requiring all scholars to invent projects likely to obtain such funding we are again actually obstructing rather than facilitating high-quality work. Again, advertisements for posts in the humanities, as you all know, now routinely make ‘a proven track
record in obtaining external funding’ a sine qua non of appointment, even in fields such as philosophy or literature where possession of such a track record may equally, we sometimes can’t help feeling, indicate a worrying lack of intellectual autonomy.

Again, I realise that my point risks seeming quixotic or simply old-fashioned, but again I think this is to underestimate the damage done by something that is becoming such an ingrained part of our institutional culture. Scholars in many humanities departments are now penalised for not ‘earning’ outside income on the scale of colleagues in science departments, and in the internal politics of these universities this may damage the humanities more than the proposed introduction of the new fee regime may do. The logic of some of the changes being currently proposed is to shift funding for research more and more away from QR funding and towards competition for research council funding, a move which will be especially damaging to our disciplines.

In the case of both the points I have made this evening, a widespread loss of confidence in the value and distinctiveness of what we do has encouraged us to acquiesce in arrangements which we should know do our disciplines a disservice. And here, in conclusion, is where I come back to the question of defensiveness. There is an inescapable element of defensiveness in all attempts to vindicate one’s activity in alien categories, a suggestion that the common
ground necessary for any justification to succeed can only be found on our critics’ or accusers’ terms. Of course, what it is for something to ‘matter’ is not itself a straightforward matter, but it can be too readily interpreted as showing that something is important because it contributes to something else that is even more important, a regress that easily becomes vicious.

Perhaps instead of yielding so promptly to the currently dominant discourse about prosperity, we should begin by saying that it’s clear why the humanities matter: they are a series of disciplined attempts to extend and deepen understanding of human activity in its greatest richness and diversity across times and cultures. And if it is so clear, the real question may be whether there actually are people who need to have that explained to them, and if so, what’s wrong with them. The kinds of understanding and judgement exercised in the humanities are of a piece with the kinds of understanding and judgement involved in living a life. We should recognise that that, in the end, is why they interest us and seem worthwhile, and perhaps we then need to acknowledge that any subsequent attempts at ‘justification’ in other terms must start from and build on that recognition. In trying to ‘justify’ the humanities, as in trying to live a life, what may turn out to matter most is holding one’s nerve.

Michael Crow:
Let me begin by saying that I don’t necessarily believe that there are any fundamental threats to the university as an idea. Nor do I believe that there are any fundamental threats to either the humanities or the sciences as areas of intellectual inquiry. In academia we often find ourselves rushing to the conclusion that just because someone questions what we’re doing, they are threatening what we do. Rather than threatening what we do, serious questioners are, as we just heard, and I agree, often motivated either by ignorance or simply concern over how it is possible to make all of what we do happen.

I am quite certain that these are, in fact, not fundamental threats because a threat would indicate some desire to eliminate or ultimately control what we do. There is no desire to eliminate. To the contrary, I could offer substantial evidence that quite the opposite desire is in play, however uninformed. In order to control what we do, external parties would have to understand what we do, and that level of understanding is generally absent. Nor do I believe that questions of relevance are, in fact, threats. These are perfectly legitimate, especially when coming from politicians who are struggling to finance a massive increase in demand for higher education. I don’t consider moving to means-based tuition in financial aid models a threat. These are, again, struggles over financial models intended to advance higher education.
Rather than threat I perceive the opposite situation. It is, in fact, how we characterize the situation that often traps us into believing that we’re fighting against the negative as opposed to the uninformed. What is the actual situation? The demand for university research has never been higher. The desire for research universities, the establishment of research universities, the advancement of research universities is basically at a fever pitch in all of the OECD countries, in all of what in America we refer to as the BRIC countries—Brazil, Russia, India, and China—and many developing nations as well. In fact, currently the rate of demand for what research universities do in the humanities and the sciences and all of the things that research universities create and stand for dramatically exceeds supply. The demand for new ideas, new theories, new ways of looking at the world, new ways of thinking about sustainability, new ways of conceptualizing how to advance democracy, new concepts, new interpretations of literature, new forms of music and art have never been in higher demand than they are right now.

What some call a threat, I basically would characterize as a massive challenge, which has created a number of stresses and provoked arguments that we now find ourselves in the middle of. The stresses from these challenges are dramatic and painful, and they require us to reconceptualize how it is that we’re going to take the academy forward and advance it on a model different than the model that existed in the past. What are some of these stresses? How do we design
higher education for high-speed change while at the same time not giving up one inch relative to our role in advancing the humanities? How do we protect the core elements of our academic culture and our capacity to explore the breadth of the cultures that we attempt to understand? There are stresses that are derived from our implementation of evolving learning technologies, for example, and the need to resolve questions regarding how to educate differently based on those technologies.

I think all of us would acknowledge immediately the impact of rapid social and economic change that surrounds the planet. One need only consider the establishment of universities in places that fifty years ago were fishing cultures—around the states of the Persian Gulf, for example—as they have been rapidly evolving and changing.

Another stress arises from the imperative to address what are in my view rigid academic bureaucracies, and when I say that, I am not referring to faculties. Instead I refer to all those aspects of institutional culture that are rigid, entrenched, and inflexible. Stress also comes from the lack of an ideal historical model from which solutions for the future can be derived. Further stress comes from the imperative to address the intense socioeconomic and ethnic and cultural diversity that certainly characterizes the United States. In the United States today, if a student comes from the lowest quartile of economic well being, he or
she has a 15 percent chance of attaining a college degree, even if that student possesses academic ability ranked in the upper quartile. If a student comes from the upper quartile of economic well being, and from the bottom quartile of academic ability, he or she has a 78 percent chance of attaining a college degree. I don’t know if anything comparable holds for the United Kingdom, but in my estimation this tells me that there’s something not right about the system, and the need to address this sort of inequity lends an additional degree of stress.

Limited additional public investment available for the historical model brings another level of stress. There may be dramatic additional public investment available for better-articulated or more evolved models but not for the historical model. Finally, science is out ahead of the public’s ability to understand what scientists do, and that gap is increasing as we speak, creating all kinds of issues. Regrettably, the political leaders and political bodies that we deal with often share the public’s lack of understanding of what scientists do.

Solutions: First, retreat from no intellectual area that advances what we believe the universities should be—ever, never. Doesn’t make any difference what politicians say, and I can give you chapter and verse of how, in a very conservative political setting, we’ve been able to do that. For example, we launched new transdisciplinary colleges and schools, including the School of Human Evolution and Social Change, and the new School of Sustainability,
which is affiliated with our Global Institute of Sustainability. We have found
new ways of engaging the humanities and the sciences in the directions that our
faculty wanted to go.

A second solution is to build new public investment models built on outcomes. I
agree very much with the earlier comments about the practice of rank-ordering
institutions based on their research activity and then allocating resources
accordingly. That’s not going to produce societal impact. We need new public
investment models built on outcomes, and the outcomes should measure what
we, in fact, contribute to society, and not just economically. Economic outcomes
would be but one indicator, but we must also contribute to every dimension of
societal well-being.

A third solution is to permit entrepreneurially oriented universities to emerge.
These institutions based on the enterprise model are not corporate in their
orientation. In the enterprise model, the government is, in fact, an investor and
not a controller. I will say that every time I come to the United Kingdom, I am
convinced that the universities are wards of the state and have insufficient
independent ability to make decisions about what they want to do, and where
they want to go, and how they want to get there. Another solution is to expand
investment mechanisms and models for all levels of public investment. One of
the things that we’ve been able to do, picking up on a model we are advancing
involving Mexico and Arizona, is to expand to multiple levels of public sector investment: municipal investment, state investment, regional investment, national investment. We are simultaneously advancing new models for private investment, philanthropic investment, and personal investment.

Another solution comes with encouraging greater institutional diversification. In the United States, all universities with negative outcomes model themselves on a handful of elite institutions that are perceived to represent the gold standard. But maybe we need a range of universities, different types of universities, with various focal areas among and between institutions, offering multiple paths to success. I have been reading that the set of schools in the United Kingdom that are able to admit students to Oxford and Cambridge seem to be highly concentrated. I don’t know if people have been tracking this or not, but in the U.S. there definitely is an artificial, social class-based ranking system. Schools are ranked based on the amount of resources that they spend per student and family-income-oriented drivers of high school success. This leads to what is basically a social-class ranking system for universities. This is not a good thing, especially if there’s only one system.

Finally, those of us in academe, a sector made up of thoughtful and considerate but highly-sheltered individuals, should begin thinking about how we want to maintain those things that are important to us. How we can take on a special
role within society as the sages and knowledge-creators that we are supposed to be. How we can make our case for broader engagement and investment, and how we can do that from a positive perspective. We need not become defensive, as if we are being threatened, because some politician along the way says, listen, I don’t want to fund these humanities anymore because I don’t understand what they do. It’s fine for us to say, well, we think that you’re wrong and, oh, by the way, if you’d like to invest in the university to be successful, you’re investing in the enterprise as a whole and here’s what we will deliver.

I think it is essential to understand this absolutely unique role that we play as a sector. We must discard the standard model, which has been to say, we do it and therefore you should invest in us. Please invest more in us and everything will be good. In our role as knowledge creators, knowledge synthesizers, disseminators of knowledge, we must find a way to project a new model.

**Martin Rees:**

I’m a scientist but I have some intellectual affinity with humanities scholars because my research is, in current jargon, blue skies research. Nothing seems less relevant than dinosaurs and the cosmos. Few things are more fascinating to inquiring minds. Few ideas have so broad a cultural resonance than those of Darwin and of Einstein. They’ve both, incidentally, been hijacked inappropriately. Darwinism in the tendentious claimed implications for ethics,
Einstein in his linkage with relativity in other contexts. But it’s surely a cultural
depri
dation not to appreciate the wonderful panorama offered by modern
cosmology and Darwinian evolution. A chain of emerging complexity led from
some mysterious beginning to atoms, stars, and planets, and on at least one
planet a biosphere containing creatures of brains able to ponder the wonder of it
all.

This common understanding should transcend all national differences. It’s part
of a truly global culture, though yet to fully penetrate the U.S. Bible Belt and part
of the Islamic world. So science is part of culture, and links with the humanities.
There’s another reason though why scientists should be concerned about the
humanities. They sensitize and guide us in choosing how science should be
applied: there’s an ever-widening gap between what science allows us to do and
what it’s prudent or ethical actually to do. We confront widely held anxieties
about genetics, brain science, artificial intelligence, et cetera. There are ways in
which the applications of science may run away too fast and imprint on the
global environment. We must address all these questions, and they deserve
broad public discussion. But for that to happen, for the democratic debate to get
beyond tabloid slogans, everyone does need a liberal education at school or at
university, which is not just in science. It includes the capacity to evaluate what
science should be applied and how.
Turning specifically to research, I think we’re all aware that there are differences in style between scholarly work in science and in the humanities, though we share the same goal. I want to just mention one, which I think does handicap public appreciation of scholarship in humanities and it’s this. When a scientist addresses a general audience, what he or she says is manifestly very different from a specialized discourse. But the audience of the popular discourse realizes it does depend by a lot of technicalities and special expertise. Incidentally, Darwin was probably the last great scientist who could fully present his original work in a literary form accessible to a wide readership. But in contrast to science, when distinguished scholars in the humanities like Adam Roberts or Stefan Collini present their work, they needn’t adopt a grossly different style of discourse when addressing general audiences from when addressing professional.

For this reason, there’s a risk that outsiders can’t readily differentiate their work and the output of more routine scholars -- that outsiders will fail to realize the underpinning that’s essential for serious research in the humanities. The problem is that scholarly output in the humanities is not completely incomprehensible to the rest of us. [Laughter] For that very reason, the hard slog, and years of preliminary study, involved in humanities research may not be fully appreciated. Moreover, the fact that many high-profile historians, for instance,
are independent scholars may lead some to feel that the humanities can flourish without being nourished entirely within academia.

I’m speaking mainly today as an individual scientist or citizen scientist, but in the recent debates on higher education in the UK, I’ve also had a representative role as president of the Royal Society. In that role, I’ve made common cause with my humanistic counterpart at the British Academy, Adam Roberts. Though I have to say, I wimpishly didn’t join him last summer when he made a valiant effort to support the humanities by a sponsored cycle ride from Land’s End to John O’Groats, and I think he deserves great applause for that *feat of endurance and commitment.*

As a parenthetic note, I should say that this academy owes its existence to a possible mistake by the Royal Society in 1900. The Royal Society at that time made a firm decision to restrict itself to the natural sciences; not to attain a remit over all forms of wissenschaft as the academies of some other countries still do. *Our* two academies, in joint submissions to the government, urged that it’s in the UK’s interest to support real academic excellence right across the board. We emphasized that we need breadth to ensure that we are linked to the best research and scholarship worldwide, and we need to attract and retain university faculty who can collectively sustain top-rate university education over all disciplines. Adam and I have also jointly confronted the vexing impact agenda
you’ve heard about from Stefan. All academics surely want their work to have impact—an impact over and above its core intellectual value. But they remain skeptical about attempts to assess impact in the way discussed by government: we don’t think it can be assessed in a way that’s short-term and fine-grained enough to be used in funding allocations.

The problem is that much impact outside academia is unpredictable, diffuse, and long-term. To take an example from physics, the people who invented the laser in 1960 used ideas that Einstein developed 40 years earlier, and they couldn’t foresee that their invention would be used in eye surgery and in DVDs. To give another slightly more frivolous example, we have to ask how much credit does Oxford University deserve now for the fact that the intellectual diversions of their professor of Anglo-Saxon, more than fifty years ago, have now led to a multi-billion dollar franchise. [Laughter] It’s a bonus, but how much credit should we give Oxford now? And another thing, which is important, I think we academics realize that the difference between the very best research and the merely good is by any measure thousands of percent. True and durable excellence is what really counts. So what, therefore, matters most even from narrow accounting perspectives isn’t the few percent savings that might be scooped up by improving efficiency in the office management sense. What’s far more crucial is to maximize the chance of landmark achievements by sustaining
an environment that attracts and nurtures those with the most promise of doing this and those with the best credentials.

My own university, Cambridge, is, I claim, a cost-effective organization; however, its organogram looks a managerial nightmare—an intricate matrix of colleges and departments. This, of course, does have its downsides, but I claim it has genuine advantages over a cleaner system of line management because even junior academics don’t feel pushed around. They’re free to develop their own interest and reputation. As they get older, they can find a niche—some optimal individual mix of teaching, research, and administration. It’s through this flexibility that I think Cambridge has been especially successful in retaining the dedicated loyalty of hundreds of highly able people despite the far from Himalayan salaries that they’re offered. Universities need to be business-like. So does a hospital, so even does a church, but that doesn’t mean that they should be like a business. Indeed the inchoate partnership model that prevails in Oxford and Cambridge is actually astonishingly cost-effective. But, of course, this is an especially anxious time when higher education has become a political football, and I won’t be parochial in the UK context now.

Our system here does need restructuring but this should be planned with a level of deliberation that Royal Commissions used to supply. It’s an implausible act of faith in efficient markets to believe that ill-informed and financially pressured
student choices will lead to an optimum outcome especially during a period of rapid transition. The analogy between buying a restaurant meal and making a key life choice about your education seem dubious. So let me offer a few heretical thoughts. I think we in this country should welcome the expansion of higher education that’s taken place over the last three decades or so -- the fact that 40 percent of young people are now in full-time higher education up to 21, but what’s needed is greater variety. All academics in all universities should, I think, be encouraged to pursue research and reflective inquiry, but if they’re in a small department, they shouldn’t expect to supervise graduate students based solely in their department. A PhD student needs not just one good supervisor but a broader horizon, too. Of course, as we see in the U.S., graduate education is far more concentrated, and the people in liberal arts colleges like Haverford or Dartmouth do excellent research; but if they have research students, they’re affiliated to another university.

Graduate-level teaching in this country, it needs to be clustered and coordination among different institutions, but that doesn’t mean that research needs to be concentrated to the same extent. And at the undergraduate level, I think our traditional three- or four-year honors degree is not appropriate for 40 percent of the age group. Indeed, I personally think it’s too specialized for almost all students and we could benefit from wider curriculum in all universities. Also there is nothing magic about the level reached after three years—the traditional bachelor degree. I think that the less selective universities in this country are too
defensive about so called dropout rate. An American will say, “I had two years of college”, and will often rightly regard the experience positive. It’s surely better for a university to take risks on admission to give students the chance that somebody after two years with some credits without necessarily being typecast as failures and without the universities feeling pressured to see unwilling students through to graduation.

These students should, of course, have their chance to return later to the same university or to another one. Of course, we shouldn’t focus just on the eighteen to twenty-one year old cohorts. Now we live longer in a faster-changing environment and the importance of mature students, half-time courses, and distance learning, which has surely grown. Student expectations are going to change. They’ve become dissatisfied with traditional lectures; the kind offered to passive audiences in universities all over the world. Given the choice between, for instance, hearing on the Internet Michael Sandel’s Harvard course on justice or attending mediocre live lectures on the same theme, few would opt for the latter.

Here in the UK, the Open University’s well-established model of distance learning supplemented by a network of local tutors has vastly more potential now than when it was founded back in the days of black-and-white TV. I know that Michael Crow at ASU has similar views about the potential of distance
learning. But of course the Internet and distance learning will never replicate the experience of attending a university like, say, Oxford and Cambridge. Institutions offering that kind of intense interactive experience, with one-on-one teaching and mentoring, will I suspect be even more in demand in the future. That’s why there is indeed a need for institutions on the liberal arts model which provide the same kind of undergraduate experience associated with Oxbridge. We don’t have any counterparts in the UK to the high-quality liberal arts colleges in the U.S., and I would hope that these could perhaps develop from some existing universities if they focus on undergraduate work.

This, of course, was the aim of the proposed college spearheaded by Professor Grayling -- but I’ll hold fire on that scheme until the discussion period. I predict a deepening bifurcation between, on the one hand, the institutions that really offer personal mentoring and tuition; and on the other hand, the open university model. The losers will be the huge and impersonal mass universities typical of those in France, Italy, or India.

Finally, I’d like to add voice to the dismay at the political prevalence of the managerial and instrumental view of education, which has been eloquently expressed by Stefan; the failure to appreciate that education is a public good as well as a private benefit for our young people. It’s a benefit to us all that young people should become well educated in subjects crucial to our society, to our
wellbeing and the quality of our lives. It’s ironic that the government in which Oxford PPE graduates are not underrepresented should promote such a Philistine agenda. Thank you very much.

Adam Roberts:

Ladies and gentlemen I have the unenviable role of speaking between you and discussion period. I can be brief, because I agree with almost everything that has been said so far, although I must admit that intellectual acrobatics are required if one is to accept that everything that has been said is consistent with everything else.

It may be useful to offer you some remarks in rather staccato form on topics that we have addressed only marginally so far. I will speak mainly with the subjects this academy is concerned with in mind, namely the humanities and social sciences. But I will also bear in mind what other speakers have stressed, in particular Martin Rees just now: the vital importance of not getting into a futile slinging match between humanities and other subjects. That way lies disaster. Indeed inasmuch as we have had any effect with government over the recent spending review and other problems, it has been because there has been a high degree of understanding between the humanities and social sciences on the one hand, and the physical sciences on the other.
Now the situation in the United Kingdom is in many respects an absurd paradox. We have had in this country a number of major public crises in recent years. We’ve had the crash in which banking institutions and city institutions hardly behaved with distinction. We’ve had the crisis over MPs’ perks and expenses where remarkably few of our legislators behaved with any distinction. Now we’re in the middle of a crisis with the behavior of the Murdoch press, which is a distressingly large part of the press in this country. So what happens? The universities get reorganized. These are institutions which, while they do have many failings, have on the whole been a success story in this country in the past ten or fifteen years. They have been particularly a success story in attracting overseas students, which I regard as one of the best measures of how effective you’re being. Overseas students don’t have to come here. They pay substantial sums of money, and in most cases their families make sacrifices for them to come. There has been a remarkable expansion of this area in the last ten years, particularly, I would note, in humanities, social sciences, and arts subjects.

So UK universities start from a position of definite strength. That measure — the measure of overseas students attracted — is only one crude measure of what is a broader truth. So, having had a reasonable record, what happens? Everything is being reorganized: student funding, research funding, visa requirements for students, and then we also have the new Research Excellence Framework. It’s a sort of a quadruple whammy that universities face. Academics on the whole,
don’t particularly like change in their own organizations. They have an understandable resistance to it. I felt that myself as a teacher. I wanted to get on with teaching and not forever to be reorganizing things and having to adjust to new and ever more complex forms and bureaucratic requirements. So a starting point within universities in this country is a degree of bafflement that a sector that has worked tolerably well—and I admit with some failures—should be required to make such radical changes and go in such a choppy journey as the complete restructuring of fees will involve. And all this at a time when other sectors that might be thought to have performed not so well don’t seem to be the subject of such radical restructuring.

I must stress one point right away and very strongly. The problem is not just a problem of this government and its ideology. The problem goes back a long way, and one has to remember that the decision, for example, to cut the core government funding for university teaching was made by the Labour government before 2010. It was then extended by the present government but it goes back. The decision in November 2009 to ask Lord Browne, former chairman of BP, to write the report on student funding was a decision by the Labour government in consultation with the other parties. If you ask Lord Browne to write a report on that subject, you’d know pretty much what you’re going to get and it’s what we got. The problem of the reluctance to continue with the old model of university has its roots in what seems to be a degree of quite
widespread political apathy about supporting universities. Other speakers have hinted at this. It’s arguable, at least, that some of this is a consequence of the rapid expansion of universities in this country following the wonderful political device of relabeling all polytechnics, et cetera, as universities at the stroke of a pen. That, of course, did create a bit of a problem. It led, for example, to the necessity for the Research Assessment Exercise. [Laughter] It contributed to the size of the bill and therefore helped to create a degree of political apathy about funding universities.

Although I think there is not a general threat to the humanities, and the humanities have a strong starting point, there are some grounds for concern. We need to be very specific about what those grounds are. The present government’s decisions, including the cuts in teaching funding, are to an extent subject-neutral. They apply as much to math as they do to humanities. We do ourselves a disservice, and this has been hinted at by other speakers, if we cast ourselves in the role of victims when a policy in some ways has been demonstrably even-handed — and was so certainly in the results of the government’s spending review on research funding, which led to a far better outcome for social sciences and humanities, as well as for the physical sciences, than any of us had dared to hope. What’s at issue is not whether there is a general animus against the humanities, but rather — and Stefan Collini touched on this I thought quite rightly — whether there are specific consequences of current policies, many of
which may be unintended consequences, which are a potential threat to the humanities.

I’ll just briefly mention three issues and then leave the rest for discussion. One, there’s the issue that hasn’t really come up this evening very much about the imposition of agendas from outside. In this country, the Haldane principle is frequently cited— the sacred principle according to which government must not interfere in research decisions. Actually, the more you look at the Haldane principle, the more it disappears and Lord Haldane himself wouldn’t recognize it in its modern form. But the underlying principle is a good one – that decisions about the direction of academic research should be made by academics. Of course there is some legitimate interest of government, and we would be foolish to deny that legitimate interest. The observance of the Haldane principle is a matter of some concern now, for solid reasons. At a time when everything’s up for grabs, and when there is a degree of suspicion between government and universities, as there undoubtedly is, at such a time there is naturally nervousness that any decision taken by a funding body may somehow be subject to government pressure.

Secondly, there’s the question of strategically important and vulnerable subjects. There are many perceived risks, because of the emphasis on the element of the market that will arise because of the new funding system. Student choices may
reflect financial caution to a greater extent than before. Some subjects, especially those which take longer to study, such as some languages, may suffer. Students may be reluctant to accept the greater degree of debt and we may see a further decline in what is already a very serious situation in the UK regarding competence in languages. The UK risks becoming a country of monoglots in a world of polyglots, and we will be infinitely the worse for it.

The third issue that I want to raise now is one that we haven’t touched on much this evening: the effect of all of these changes on graduate studies — including, but not only, in the humanities. If, by the time they finish their first degree, students have acquired a degree of debt or tax liability of thirty or forty thousand pounds, are they then going to be willing to up the ante, as it were, and do one, two, or three more years of study for a master’s degree or a doctorate? The underfunding of postgraduate studies is a long-running problem in Britain. I have been conscious throughout my academic career, and certainly in the last twenty years, that it’s very, very hard for Brits, however perfect their record, to get a grant for graduate studies. That situation looks like it is being exacerbated under the ongoing changes, and this has very serious implications for the future renewal of our profession. All other questions, I’m happy leave to discussion. Thank you very much.
Simon Blackburn:²

It was a privilege to open the meeting at which so many important issues were addressed by so many distinguished speakers. It is much harder to summarise the already concise and lucid points that were made so well. I shall therefore content myself with highlighting what seem to me to have been widely shared views and themes, and with developing a few of those in my own voice.

It was stressed by both Adam Roberts and Martin Rees, and unanimously agreed, that whatever challenges higher education faces, the humanities and sciences are in it together. Immanuel Kant said that ‘physiological knowledge of the human being concerns the investigation of what nature makes of the human being; pragmatic, the investigation of what he as a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself’. The one is the domain of natural science, the other that of the humanities. We need both, just as we need the wider scientific knowledge not just of human beings but of the world they inhabit.

It was also generally agreed that there is no intentional threat either to the universities in general or to the humanities in particular. There is no ideological drive to starve or to shut down any particular branch of human understanding. If there are threats at all, then they are the side effect of other movements: collateral damage, as it were. It is therefore inappropriate for us to take up a defensive or aggressive posture towards governments and legislatures in

² Fellow, Trinity College Cambridge; Distinguished Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of North Carolina. These remarks were written by Professor Blackburn subsequent to the event at the request of the editors for addition to the transcript.
general, although of course we may disagree with individual features of their policies.

Nevertheless, there are certainly elements in the current atmosphere that are capable of inflicting this collateral damage. Stefan Collini accurately highlighted one of them. This is the distortion that arises when the language of social and economic benefit that is used to justify public support of an activity is translated into a measure of how well that activity is being pursued. This seductive slide is in fact lethal. To give an analogy: the Olympic games have so far garnered some twelve billion pounds of public support, and politicians have naturally tried, with contestable success, to describe expected social and economic benefits resulting from this expenditure. But nobody in their right mind asks that each competition, such as pole-vaulting or discus-throwing, must make a case on these grounds, and still less that excellence in these endeavours should be measured in those terms. It is no more sensible to appoint, retain, and promote academics on grounds of their economic impact than it would be to ask pole-vaulters or discus-throwers to concentrate on this in their training. A pole-vaulter’s business is to vault higher; a scientist’s is to understand nature better, and our business in the humanities is to broaden, deepen, and transmit understanding of what ‘a free-acting being makes of himself, or can and should make of himself’, and nothing else.

Professor Collini also pointed out a more local distortion when an index of success in laboratory science, such as the ability to attract large amounts of
external and sometimes commercial funding, is simply applied to other subjects, leading academics to scramble for money to fund large collaborative projects, when excellence in their own endeavours would actually require only solitary time in libraries or studies.

Here I would like to add in my own voice a remark about the managerial language that is apt to feed these distorting influences. It is rightly said that universities need to be “accountable” for their public subsidies. But this conceals the question of what form these accounts should take, to whom they should be presented, and what kind of management, or in the UK, micro-management, would be an appropriate response to them. But if the audience for any account is interested in the wrong things, and tone deaf to the right things, the accounting may well be inimical to the long-term growth and health of any institution. In academic life the accounts have to be long-term, and the audience has to be capable of appreciating the real value of education and research. Short-term measures applied by tone-deaf auditors can do nothing but damage. The continuing emphasis on the ‘impact’ agenda in the UK is unfortunately apt to do such damage. As Lord Rees’s telling examples illustrate, the appropriate metaphor for the causal processes whereby science proceeds is not impact but diffusion: equally real, but often slow, and often incapable of disaggregation. You cannot say that any individual advance created some definite percentage of an eventual breakthrough. The same is true, obviously enough, of the way in which ideas about ourselves diffuse through the social world.
Changing the atmosphere in which these distortions seem natural is certainly a challenge. On a different topic, it was also generally agreed that in the future there is likely to be a challenging polarization between the widely diffused, excellent, but impersonal spread of lectures and information, freely or cheaply available on the web, and the highly intensive education of the mind that requires practice, personal supervision and tuition, patient attention to students’ fledgling efforts, as well as the whole myriad set of interactions that first-class university life offers them. In the United States, as Jonathan Cole and Michael Crow both touched upon, there is, if not a polarization, certainly a huge spectrum of institutions, and no tendency towards the homogenizing ambitions of British university policy. With the political will to provide public support undoubtedly dwindling, the challenge for universities in both countries is to bring enough private support into the system to ensure that for those capable of benefiting from it, the most intensive education is still available.

It is sometimes said that our problems arise because understanding and knowledge do not figure in utilitarian calculations and cost-benefit analysis. If they do not, this is itself because of a philosophical mistake. It is better to say that we need not less utilitarianism but more. It was John Stuart Mill, after all, who said that it was better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a pig satisfied, and if the pig disagrees that is because it knows only one side of the issue. It is only the most crass measures of well-being that leave out all the pleasures and values that make life infused with knowledge, and conducted with ability, preferable to
mere animal existence. So another challenge is to undermine the unspoken assumption that consumption is an adequate measure of well-being, and that the powers and understanding of the consumer are entirely irrelevant. There is no doubt that market forces, brilliant at playing upon the fears and vanities of the public, are better equipped to suppress this message than educators have been at getting it across, and this too is a challenge to which the academy needs to rise.

Without trust on both sides, there is bound to be friction between whoever pays the piper, and the musician himself. In both the UK and the USA it is a constant task for universities to ensure that this trust is maintained and strengthened. The conference showed that we can be optimistic that this can be done; it also showed how necessary and how difficult it can be to do it.