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The new geo-politics of higher education

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Thank you very much Dame Nicola. Let me acknowledge our key note speaker, Professor Michael Ignatieff, who in a few minutes time will deliver this year’s Burton R. Clark Lecture on Higher Education. And Professor Michael Arthur, the Provost of UCL, who will introduce Professor Ignatieff. We are grateful that both Michaels have included us today, among the many responsibilities they carry as university leaders. And grateful to you Dame Nicola. Your support and guidance for the Centre of Global Higher Education (or CGHE as we say), has been most welcome and very valuable. I must also warmly acknowledge Anna Phillips, Connie Ekpenyong, Centre Deputy Directors Claire Callender and William Locke, our researchers, our doctoral students, all at CGHE who have helped with the conference. And thank you all for coming today.

… I have been asked to tell you that the toilets are located at the back of the entrance foyer by the lifts. And there are no planned fire drills today, so if the fire alarm goes off please exit via the stairs up to Level 2, and leave the building via the doors on the right. The fire assembly point is in Woburn Square (by the park). There, now you have the most important information.

Colleagues, we meet at a momentous time. Higher education and research are affected by tensions between the national and the global. Research-intensive universities straddle a fault line between the national and the global. We are a product of the nation-building agenda of the state. We are also closely engaged in global relations. These are immensely productive for knowledge and learning, but do not create a universal flow of visible benefits for all, in the manner of textbook public goods such as street lighting. So we have something to prove. We have to work to do, to turn our global work into national and local benefits. This is now an issue in the Atlantic countries. It is not the same everywhere. Our colleagues in East Asia are less troubled by migration resistance, or anti-science or anti-university rhetoric from political leaders.

Today’s keynotes, and the panel on higher education and equality, will highlight for you developments, issues and problems in the new geo-politics of higher education. Let me make a few remarks on the larger setting. Five remarks. The growth of participation. The expansion of science. The rise of China and East Asia. Populism, unstable polities and global mobility. And the resource conundrum facing higher education in the UK. You will notice that so far I haven’t mentioned … Brexit… Oh well, now it’s out.

Despite our English dramas, at global level there are some reasons to be pleased with where the world is moving. First, participation. Consider the worldwide growth of enrolments at tertiary level. From 1995 to 2015 the world Gross Enrolment Ratio as measured by UNESCO rose from 16 to 36 per cent, with four fifths of the 216 million tertiary students in full degree programmes. In more than 60 education systems around the world, age group participation exceeds 50 per cent. In all but the poorest quarter of countries tertiary education is expanding rapidly. Some say ‘too many graduates’. But families and students say ‘we want more graduates’. We want opportunities. And that is unstoppable. Regardless of the type of political system governments must support it. So we are seeing a major expansion of educated ‘capability’, to use Amartya Sen’s term. This is growth in human freedoms, a growth in knowledge, skills and competence to navigate the world. In a generation half the world’s young people will be higher educated. Quality varies. Some are formed more deeply than others, with more knowledge and skills. But this is a great change, part of the worldwide modernization process.

The surge in science is, if anything, more remarkable. In talking about global science my data include large parts of social science. The humanities, which are vital parts of universities in all countries, are predominantly national not global. On the world scale, research-intensive universities, and the intellectual disciplines they harbor, now operate as a single network, which can be entered freely and is intensively integrated. And positive sum in its manner of operation. Within the networking logic each new party is free to work with anyone else. Established nations and universities do not gate-keep, they nurture new nations and new universities through collaboration and co-publication. With most innovations sourced from the global science system not national science, all nations want to develop their own science capacity so as to access the global system. There has been massive growth in total R&D investment, in total scientific output, and in internationally collaborative papers. Between 2003 and 2016 the worldwide number of science papers, mostly by university researchers and many fed into knowledge-intensive industries, grew by 93 per cent, rising from 1.2 million to 2.3 million. Over the same period, papers with international co-authors rose from 16 to 22 per cent. It is much higher in Europe where most countries have collaboration rates of 50 per cent plus. UCL’s the international collaboration rate is 60 per cent. We are globalized. And globalizing. We are part of this massive flow of new knowledge, creating incalculable benefits, which is without precedent in history. If anyone tells you the essential purpose of higher education is just to produce private economic benefits for graduates, tell them to think again! Higher education does *much much* more than this. And knowledge, the reproduction, inculcation and creation of knowledge, is the heart of what makes universities distinctive as social and educational organizations. As was argued by Burton R. Clark, whose work we celebrate in the annual lecture you are about to hear.

The surge in science is also the formation of a multi-polar science system. Many more nations are entering the open global network. There have been major developments in parts of Europe and Latin America and amazing growth and improvement in China, South Korea and Singapore. The main achievements in East Asia are confined to physical sciences STEM, but there the top Chinese and Singaporean universities are rapidly approaching the performance of the top American universities. South Korea now spends 4.2 per cent of GDP on research, the highest ratio in the world. China’s R&D budget has reached that of the United States. In only ten years between 2006 and 2016 the annual number of science papers produced in China rose from 190,000 to 426,000. In the first Leiden ranking China had no universities that produced more than 1000 high citation papers. Six years later in the most recent Leiden ranking it had seven, the same as the UK. In the number of high citation papers in mathematics and complex community, Tsinghua well ahead of every other university in the world, Nanyang University of Technology in Singapore is second. In physical sciences and engineering, Berkeley and MIT are one and two. But when physical sciences, engineering, maths and computing are combined, Tsinghua just shades MIT as number one in the world in physical sciences STEM. Science power has become more plural. And we all have something to learn from Chinese civilization in its modernizing time. Listen, respect, understand. These are the keys to learning in a global knowledge system across cultural and geographic boundaries, in the common network.

Networked global science needs mobility in order to operate. It needs the free flow and sharing of ideas, data, synthetic knowledge and people. Doctoral research and especially postdoctoral research are international. Nativist populism, anti-globalization rhetoric and migration resistance are trouble for universities and science. Dividing societies on nativist grounds, based on an ugly refusal to respect or understand the other, shifts attention from the gross and growing inequalities of income and wealth in the political economy. It is an axe stroke down the middle of the common public good. It is as sharp an attack on the principle of solidarity as there can be. Without solidarity how can we make progress on equality, or expect to expand our freedoms? And how can we practice constructive international or local relationships?

So far in higher education the free flow of ideas has not so much been affected—though there are problems in some countries—but the pushback against migration and its mobilization as a tool of rule is another matter. That is a clear and present danger. In the UK migration-based populism has given us Brexit, where the sector is losing thousands of present and future ‘talents’, as they say in China—and also the Home Office choke-hold on international education, the intrusive surveillance, the refusal to put in place either a welcome mat or an attractive post-study work visa regime. Nativist targeting of migration, and out and out racism, sustain Trump’s politics of national identity. It is the pretext for Orban’s suppression of civil society and Central European University in Hungary. When migration politics spills over into challenges to free inquiry on national security grounds, when it becomes the motor of attacks on Kantian public rationality, experts, and science, we need to find ways to unlock this fear of free people movement. Because freedom of mobility, like all the human freedoms, is a common good that is intrinsically beneficial to all. We should never surrender on this.

Of concern also in the UK is the potential for bad policy in a destabilised political system. On one hand government clamps down on the sector, to minimise the risks, shift the blame downwards and make the populist gesture. On the other hand it lurches into high risk decisions with downward effects on quality—like the promise, fortunately not carried out, to cut international student numbers by 30-40 per cent, and the decision that may come in future, to slash tuition back to £5-6k without compensatory public funding. Our research on higher education and Brexit tells us that in the next five years, depending on the timing of Brexit-related effects, UK higher education will have a special financial problem. Income will be driven down by several factors at once—cuts to tuition, the loss of ERDF and EIB funding, a drop in EU student income in many institutions, the possibility of reduced engagement in the European research programmes. And income from international students, the one item that can compensate for lost income, constrained. These downward drivers on the bottom line will also further stratify the sector. Some institutions have the resources to cope better than others.

Is there a way to a more financially sustainable future? You can bet that we in CGHE are working on it. We are also working on migration policy and international students. Rational inquiry does not solve all the political problems, but it sure beats the hell out of the post-truth alternative. In the afternoon the conference will talk about the CGHE research projects in progress. Stay to talk to us about the research. Please see this as a participatory forum, your forum. Enter the discussion when you want, through the day. Thank you all for listening to my inadequate words. It is now a pleasure to hand back to Dame Nicola for the main event.