

Lord Inglewood recently addressed 60 guests at a NCUP luncheon in the Cholmondeley Room at the House of Lords. His subject was, 'Future Prospects for Higher Education'.

His address, which he explained was prepared without any especial experience or expertise of HE, began with a brief review of the history of higher education going back to the earliest 'Socratic tradition', which provided the groundwork for Western systems of logic and philosophy (Socrates, born Athens, 470 BC). His influence is with us today. Plato, also born in Athens, and a student of Socrates, was founder of the Platonic Academy, a place of higher education with unparalleled influence. He also mentored the philosopher Aristotle, born 384BC who, in turn, founded his own place of higher education at the Lyceum in 335BC.

Some centuries later, during the Roman Empire, the educational system gradually evolved – not least in Alexandria, which apparently in its Library had some posts paid for by what we would now call the Government. Formal schools had been established, which served paying students (very little existed that could be described as free public education). The system, much like the one that predominates today, arranged schools into three tiers, elementary, secondary and tertiary. It is difficult to be precise but it is known that the literacy rate of the population was low.

Again some centuries further on, the first UK University was founded in Oxford with its teaching existing in some form in 1096. It is the oldest university in the English-speaking world. Cambridge followed in 1209, Edinburgh opened its doors to students in 1583 and Durham in 1832. The six Red Brick (City) Universities were founded in the early 1900's, with several plate-glass Universities established in the UK during the 1960s, during the era of the Robbins Report on Higher Education. By the end of 2015, there were 154 recognised higher learning institutions, which could award degrees in the United Kingdom. It is important he stressed to understand the past in order to understand the future.

For the year ended 31 July 2016, Cambridge University had a total income of £1.64 billion, of which £462 million was from research grants and contracts. The central university and colleges have a combined endowment of around £5.89 billion. Whilst Cambridge is clearly in a sound situation with excellent prospects for the future, not all our Universities are as fortunate. Independent financial stability and being at arms' length from the State is important to secure academic freedom and pluralism which underpin their activities and what they are for. Lord Inglewood pointed out that, whilst expansion of Universities is inherently desirable, he warned of the possibility of the quality of degrees being lowered and of the problem of obtaining well-qualified staff.

Lord Inglewood then highlighted some of what he considered to be self-evident, major contributions of UK Universities to our society. The growth of the number of educated and articulate individuals underscores freedom of speech and of thought. The greater the intellectual rigour directed at problems within our society the more likely we shall take the best decisions. The development of equality for both men and women has entailed that virtually all individuals of voting age have a 'voice' backed by education in the government of their country and in local elections. The rule of law, together with equality under it has been achieved, together with a highly qualified legal profession, independent of Government. Financial benefits and a continuing raising of the quality of life and 'life expectancy' have been made through the advances in research within the medical, technological, social sciences and humanities of University domains, with a consequent rise of a substantial professional class and greater prosperity and a better quality of life for all.

The development of Universities in the Commonwealth with the UK model also demonstrates a worldwide influence which has been mutually beneficial.

Following Lord Inglewood's address, questions were taken from the guests. The first concerned the payment of student fees, with the consequent risk of missing able students from poorer families, because of their fear of debt and the consequent likely loss of bright students from the National 'Pool of Ability'. Cicero (106 - 43 BC) was quoted in this context as one of the earliest known examples of an individual who was the first of his family to achieve Roman office. Lord Inglewood said he believed it was important admission should be based on ability and not simply qualifications and carried out by the Universities themselves, and whatever the financial arrangements they should not be such as to deter the able participating.

There was further extended discussion, involving the guests, on pros and cons of Brexit and how it might impinge on HE Sector and what the consequences might be. He was concerned about some of what it might entail for the sector. A question of practical significance was posed regarding students with unrealistic expectations of their grades who queried these and the consequent time that this could involve academic staff in establishing that a fair and impartial grade had been given. The debate moved on to the need for specialism within Universities brought about by the availability, or lack of it, of expertise. One suggestion was raised about the possibility of a two tier system within Universities e.g. certain Universities granting first degrees only.

When the question of Islamic radicalism on campus was raised he emphasised the topic should be discussed in an intellectually rigorous way, but in so doing it should not become a platform for proselytization or political outreach.

Lord Inglewood commented that national achievements through higher education are still gaining momentum, particularly in research which needs to be of the highest class. Further, as regards the Future, the sheer number of graduates may increase but perhaps, more importantly, their quality will become even more important to society in the kind of World into which we are moving.

In summary, Lord Inglewood saw the overall prospects for higher education in a positive and constructive way. He saw consolidation and development through time of the many points that had been made. In consequence, his audience felt indebted to him and left the lunch with a 'feel good' impression for the future of UK Universities.

We thanked Lord Inglewood for a most interesting and amusing presentation and for answering the varied questions with the greatest of aplomb.

Professor Terence Davis OBE
Vice President