



Experts must fight back

Amid growing indifference to the public value of universities, the LSE's Minouche Shafik suggests four ways to restore confidence and pride in the academy

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By [Minouche Shafik \(/author/minouche-shafik/\)](/author/minouche-shafik/)



Universities often take their public value for granted. We witness at first hand how immersion in an environment of scholarship, diversity and enquiry can open doors of opportunity for students from all sorts of backgrounds. We have seen pioneering research save lives, reduce poverty, expand the frontiers of human knowledge, and enrich us all.

And it's not just about the headline-grabbing graduate and research success stories. University leaders understandably like to highlight the students and researchers who go on to become Nobel prizewinners or presidents and prime ministers (18 and 36 respectively at the London School of Economics, in case you're interested), but it is also about inspiring the history or social policy student who goes on to become a schoolteacher, entrepreneur or social worker.



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It is also about the application of research to the real world that is the basis of human progress. In previous roles at the World Bank, the UK Department for International Development, the International Monetary Fund and the Bank of England, I have seen at first hand how growing reliance on evidence-based policy has transformed the way that important decisions are made throughout the world.

But there are worrying currents in many countries that threaten the foundations of this progress. Populist politicians peddle prejudice, paranoia and false promises. The negative side-effects of globalisation result in some arguing for more closed societies. People with deep knowledge of issues are overshadowed in public debate in favour of those with large followings on social media. And in many countries, independent institutions such as universities, but also the media, the judiciary and central banks, are under attack.

Consider the example of the UK and the challenges arising from the decision to leave the European Union. EU students' applications to British universities have dropped by 5 per cent since the referendum. This follows years of increases. If the British government is not careful, decades of work to make the UK an attractive destination for students from around the world will be lost. These students make an enormous contribution to the UK's social, cultural and – of course – economic life. According to Universities UK, international students were responsible for £10.8 billion of export earnings in the UK economy in 2014-15. Trying to constrain the number of international students by including them in the government's net migration target is an economically irrational policy.

At the LSE, we have one of the most international faculties in the world and students enrolled from over 160 countries, with nearly 150,000 alumni spread throughout 200 countries worldwide. So far, our student numbers have increased, but even the LSE cannot defy gravity for ever. The UK government also needs to urgently clarify the status of non-British EU staff and their families, and ensure that UK universities can continue to attract European research partners and funding. Those who travel across the world in search of knowledge often form lifelong attachments to both their host institution and country. The value of that soft power should not be underestimated.

But beyond Brexit, there is a wider desire from some quarters for more isolation and less internationalism. And that affects us all since, by their nature, universities thrive in an environment of openness and tolerance. At best there is a greater indifference towards those who possess the knowledge and evidence to better inform policymaking on a national and international level. At worst there is actual hostility expressed to “experts” presented as part of a distant and malevolent elite.

What can universities do to turn the tide against these forces and restore public confidence and pride in the academy? I would like to suggest four areas where universities should act.

The 2018 World University Rankings will be published at 14.01 on Tuesday 5 September (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/blog/world-university-rankings-2018-coming-soon-what-you-need-know>)

First, we need to reinforce, raise awareness of and spread the well-established principles that govern what constitutes a valid intellectual contribution. Practices such as peer review, competitive process for funding research, requirements to publish data, and

transparency about conflicts of interest are fundamental to academic life. Most people are unaware of these practices, which are the bedrocks of academic quality and progress – we need to spread the practices to other domains such as thinktanks and the media.

Second, we need to do a better job at communication. Too many of the messages coming out of universities sound self-serving and they neglect to emphasise the public goods that we produce. The internet has democratised information, which has had huge educational benefits. But it also means that experts are just another voice in the crowd, especially if their language is inaccessible. It doesn't matter if you've spent years sifting through information, analysing the data and reviewing the literature.

As a research community, we need to be clear about the things that we know and honest about those that we don't. We should strive to communicate clearly about our work, aiming to reach not only those who want to hear from us but, crucially, those to whom we are, more often than not, an irrelevance. That doesn't mean being simplistic or misrepresenting research in order to go viral on social media channels. It can mean working with thoughtful and effective storytellers to reach a wider public – consider, for example, Sir David Attenborough's work to raise awareness of the environment or Michael Lewis on the risks inherent in financial markets.

A third area of focus is how we teach and train the next generation. Instilling in them an appreciation for rigour and a commitment to engage with public debate as experts and as citizens is vital. Some recent work at Stanford University (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/stanford-university>) tested thousands of students across the US to see whether they could distinguish an ad from a news story or whether they noticed that data came from a political lobbying group. The Stanford History Education Group's study, called "Evaluating Information: the Cornerstone of Civic Online Reasoning", concluded: "At every case and at every level, we were taken aback at students' lack of preparation. At present we worry that democracy is threatened by the ease at which disinformation about civic issues is allowed to spread and flourish."

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Finally, to effectively challenge a rise in anti-intellectual sentiment, we need to engage with views that are different, even if they are uncomfortable. The world needs neutral spaces for real debate between different worldviews more than ever – universities are

well positioned to provide that while staying true to their values of respectful discourse and rigour.

At the LSE, for example, this means instilling future policymakers, teachers and civil society leaders with the critical thinking, sense of enquiry, and knowledge to tackle the world's biggest problems. Over the coming year, we will place a special emphasis on understanding why so many countries are divided and how rethinking the welfare state might be a way to rebuild solidarity across societies while coping with the pressures of ageing, technological change, the changing nature of work and rising inequality.

Universities may not get everything right all the time, but they are a genuine force for good in the world. At a time when many of the values we hold dear are under threat, we need to do a better job of explaining our contribution to society and how essential rigour, clear communication, training in critical thinking and genuine academic debate are to the good that we do.

Dame Minouche Shafik takes over as director of the London School of Economics and Political Science (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/london-school-economics-and-political-science>) on 1 September. She was previously deputy governor of the Bank of England.

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