

Prospering Wisely: How research helps us confront the tough choices we face in creating a healthier society.

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We are witnessing a growing mistrust, not only in political processes and politicians, but in social institutions as a whole. Inequality is also rising on many crucial dimensions. Lord Stern of Brentford, President of the British Academy argues we need a new kind of national conversation, and the voice of the humanities and social sciences must be at its centre. Researchers and scholars help make the complex intelligible, and help us understand human values and possibilities.



Our times confront us with tough choices, as societies, as economies, and as individuals. To understand challenges which include an ageing population, migration, sustaining the environment and managing climate change, we require conceptual clarity and impartial, evidence-based research and analysis, together with open-mindedness and creativity in exploring new ideas. This is precisely what research and scholarship in humanities and social sciences do. The quest for a better, deeper, more valuable life has always been at their heart. They seek to illuminate the human condition and explain how economies, cultures and societies function. In addition to the intrinsic value of this quest, the insights it generates can guide – and promote – reasoned political and public discourse, by bringing fresh knowledge and ideas to the fore.

The UK's deep reservoir of research and expertise across these disciplines – from history to psychology, economics to law, literature to philosophy and languages to archaeology – is a national asset which informs and enlarges our understanding and decision-making. It is driven by a desire to examine and explain human behaviour and aspirations: to understand empirically how and where society is functioning and malfunctioning; to explore the ethical foundations of decision-making and its underlying assumptions; to seek to learn from history; to scrutinise how evidence supports or undermines policy options; to analyse the drivers and implications of a changing world economy and polity, and how different societies and cultures interact. It encompasses all of the elements that make for 'a good life' and a healthy society.



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Alongside the complementary and similarly essential disciplines of science, engineering and medicine, the humanities and social sciences are vital drivers of human progress. They provide the rigorous scrutiny and insights, the ideas and the long-term thinking that can and should have a profound influence on social and cultural well-being, on a modern economy driven by knowledge and innovation, and, ultimately, on our place and reputation in the world. A society without thriving social sciences and humanities risks achieving at best only an arid kind of prosperity, far less rich than our creative human culture deserves – and at worst confusion, apathy, decline and conflict.

The crucible for creating ideas and understanding, and developing learning and expertise here in the UK is in our universities, hugely respected throughout the world. Humanities and social sciences are taught by 65,000 academic staff (more than a third of the total, and around half of all active researchers). One million UK undergraduates study them (46 per cent of the total) together with some 60 per cent of all postgraduates; and most leaders in public life – government, business and the voluntary sector – were educated in these disciplines. They also attract some 250,000 overseas students annually (nearly 60 per cent of the total), making vital contributions to the future of our international relationships and to our economy.

More than three-quarters of the UK economy is now in services, which flourish by employing people with knowledge and skills from the humanities and social sciences – skills of critical analysis, problem solving, negotiation and communication, teaching and listening, and speaking other languages. And these contributions go far beyond sectors classified as ‘services’, into companies in manufacturing or natural resources. An oil company, for example, needs the skills of geologists and engineers but, just as important to its ability to function successfully, it also needs skilled human capital and specific sector skills in a range of other areas. These include international relations, political economy, law, marketing, finance, management (particularly of risk), geography and logistics, the history, culture and languages of places where it produces and sells, and so on.

We have, in my view, reached a position which is potentially of great historical significance. We are witnessing a decline in confidence, and sometimes a growing mistrust, not only in political processes and politicians, but in social institutions such as the media and journalism, the police and religious organisations. Inequality is rising on many crucial dimensions. We have, for many, a confusion or anxiety around moral or social values, and community or individual identity. In my own subject of economics, we have less confidence in our ability to understand processes of growth, employment and change. We must seek growth that is sustainable in relation to our natural environment.

And these difficulties are not confined to our own country; they are reflected in many societies, rich and poor, around the world. These difficulties affect us all, from young people looking for work, to older people worried about the future of their healthcare.

If we, as a society, cannot put this process into reverse, we will all be the losers. We need a new kind of national conversation, and the voice of the humanities and social sciences must be at its centre. Our researchers and scholars help delineate the choices we confront as a society and as individuals, and how best to respond. They help make the complex intelligible, and help us understand human values and possibilities. Their business is to challenge and question, and their challenges are sometimes awkward and difficult for those in authority. They demand rigour and honesty, they force alternative ethical or social perspectives into the open. The British Academy has a key role in a new national conversation that can strengthen public discussion and help us understand better the meaning of prosperity, and identify pathways to greater prosperity, in all its dimensions.

Lord Stern is one of the speakers with Universities Minister Greg Clark and Professors Julia Black and Conor Gearty at [Enriching our lives – why the humanities and social sciences matter now](#) at LSE on Tuesday 3 February.

This is an extract of Lord Stern's introduction to [Prospering Wisely: How the humanities and social sciences enrich our lives](#), a booklet and campaign produced by the British Academy containing contributions drawn from longer interviews with some of the UK's leading academics, all Fellows of the British Academy (FBAs), which offer illustrations of the great potential of informed public reasoning in action.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

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