

A Cumberland Lodge residential conference

“Beyond the Campus:  
An Interdisciplinary Examination of the Value of Research”  
28 – 30 January 2009

A Summary Report

**Introduction:** The interdisciplinary nature of this conference was intended to be two-fold. On the one hand it sought to bring together doctoral students across all academic disciplines in order to discuss what it was that their research had in common, in spite of the very different areas in which they operated. A significant aspect of this was the requirement that all participating students had to make a short 20 minute presentation of their work in progress to their peers. On the other hand the Conference also brought together in a series of plenary sessions university academics with professionals “beyond the campus” who, while educated to doctoral level, now pursued a profession and vocation outside of academia.

In all of this the intention was both to celebrate university research and to see how it might impact on life and organisations beyond higher education. This seemed all the more pertinent against the backdrop of Research Council Reports that indicate a rough 50/50 split between doctoral postgraduates moving into direct university employment and those who work in other sectors.

The Conference proved to be particularly attractive to postgraduates in all fields. This much was indicated by the fact that an initial invitation for forty such participants resulted in fifty seven being enrolled, and a waiting list created for others. It did not appear to be as immediately attractive to academics, of whom only seven enrolled other than the various speakers invited to contribute. Including invited speakers, therefore, and the members of the Conference Programme at Cumberland Lodge the Conference had some 84 participants in total. It made for three very stimulating days.

**Keynote Addresses:** Of which there were two, framing the beginning and the end of the Conference. The first, entitled “The Intellectual and the Public Square”, was given by **Tom Docherty**, Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Warwick. It was a masterly exercise in demonstrating, amongst other things, the relative inability of the academy to be the critic, the questioner and challenger, of society that the latter needs so badly. In large measure this is so because, once the academy begins the process of providing that kind of critique, it soon discovers that society (the public square) will so enfold it that it becomes impossible to exist as anything other than another, essentially conservative, contributing voice. As a reminder, however, of the responsibility of Research (and by extension Researchers) to pose necessary challenges to the society that gives it, and them, space, Docherty’s opening remarks provided a welcome impetus and encouragement.

If this opening address had what might be called “macro” concerns at heart, developing as it did the role of the institution as researcher, the second keynote address given by **Lesley Chamberlain**, a freelance writer and critic, emphasised the “micro”. Entitled “The Perils of Success”, the address laid out a way of thinking about career and its duties based upon the almost savage critique of ambition that one finds in the later writings of Freidrich Nietzsche, especially in “Ecce Homo”. As a reminder of the perils that inevitably follow on any success that we may experience in life and career, and of a way, therefore, that we might construe them differently to our well being as people (“micro” in the sense that what Docherty demanded of the institution, the “macro”, Chamberlain also demanded of the individual) it provided the Conference with a nicely rounded theme.

**Plenary Sessions:** Four “encounters” between academics and other professionals formed the centrepiece of the Conference. Initially conceived as an encounter between two people within a particular discipline (these being Modern History; Social Science; Natural Science and Performing Arts) the discussion that ensued on each occasion served to demonstrate both common areas of concern across disciplines as well as obvious disparities and peculiarities.

The eight speakers within these four plenary meetings were as follows:

**Dr Justin Champion**, Professor of History and Head of Department, Royal Holloway, University of London (PhD History, Cambridge)

**Dr Tim Brain**, Chief Constable of Gloucestershire (PhD, History, University of Wales)

**Dr Grace Davie**, Professor of Sociology, University of Exeter (PhD, Sociology LSE)

**Dr Kate Gavron**, Chair of Carcanet Press Ltd (PhD, Social Anthropology, LSE)

**Dr Hilary Richards**, Sub-Dean, Faculty of Life Sciences, University College London (PhD, Microbial Genetics, Royal Postgraduate Medical School)

**Dr Mark Lloyd Davies**, Government Affairs Manager, sanofi-aventis. (PhD, Earth Sciences, University of Amsterdam)

**Dr Liz Schafer**, Professor of Drama and Theatre Studies, Royal Holloway, University of London, (PhD, Drama, King’s College London)

**Dr Oliver Ford Davies**, Actor and Writer (DPhil, History, Oxford)

Each speaker was asked to address some, if not all, of the following questions:

(1) What was/is your particular area of academic research?

(2) What led you to do it? Why do you, if at all, continue?

(3) What career aspirations did you have on embarking on that research? Have they been fulfilled? How and when (if at all) did they come to change?

(4) In what ways has that research enabled your career?

(5) If anything, what would you do differently?

There was, therefore, a "confessional" theme to this part of the Conference, and this was an aspect that some participants felt, in initial feedback, may have provided too much personal biography at the expense of raising more specific, discipline related, questions. This criticism was in part justified. At the same time it was intriguing to see how the same kind of issues arose from one discipline and area of professional life to another, and that a conversation that had begun in one plenary found that it could continue to a second if the agenda was important enough. There is also no doubt that hearing at first hand from those who had experienced the research process and had entered careers on the basis of their achievements within it, while also making mistakes on the way, was invaluable to a generation of students at the beginning of that journey. A third benefit of these sessions was the fact that they each created an agenda that had not been considered at their inception. No one, for example, might have guessed that issues of gender would come to the fore as much as they did in the conversation between Grace Davie and Kate Gavron. Given that female students and academics represented approximately two thirds of the Conference, however, it was more than timely that it did. The obvious tensions between the desire to get on with research while the academy placed seemingly ever more organisational and managerial demands on academics' shoulders was a second recurrent theme, as was also the fact that career advancement often depended on one's willingness to engage with precisely that aspect of the life of the academy that had never presented itself as an initial reason for becoming a university teacher. A fourth theme which emphasised the loss of the art of teaching to the increased demands of management also found a voice across all disciplines. This, however, is to centre too much on the academic voices in this conversation. Those who contributed to it from professions beyond the academy were, while recognising the particular constraints that academics were under, also able to show something of how these issues worked themselves out in wider society and how, in many ways, the life of the university academic was still one to be envied. The academics present did at least give due recognition to this particular point.

**Student Presentations:** A requirement of all students attending the Conference was that they make a short presentation of their work in progress to a small group of their peers. Five groups of approximately twelve students in each were convened and, in two separate meetings with presentations lasting no more than 20 minutes in total, each student was asked to explain to an essentially lay audience what he or she was researching. This enterprise proved to be one of the highpoints of the Conference, not least because many participants commented on the fact that the exercise asked them to do something that they had never been asked to do before and that having to explain what they were doing to people engaged on the same research career but in very different fields proved more taxing than at first imagined. At the heart of the process, however, was a celebration of Research as an enterprise worthy of time and effort. Participants came away from these sessions in particular with a renewed enthusiasm for what they do and why they do it. They also gained respect for disciplines and practitioners other than their own.

*Please note: A full list of titles of these fifty seven Presentations is obtainable on request from the Conference Programme Co-ordinator, Janis Reeves. Please email [janis@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk](mailto:janis@cumberlandlodge.ac.uk).*

**After Dinner Address:** It was with great pleasure that the Conference was able to welcome as speaker **Professor Sir Drummond Bone**. Recently retired he spoke out of a lifetime spent within higher education. He also spoke as someone who had never possessed the degree and status that all students at the Conference sought, having been given his first academic post in the days when a doctorate was not a prerequisite for working within the university. This, he acknowledged, would simply not be possible now. Not that the lack of such a qualification had hampered his career in any way. Having begun as a scholar in English, with a particular interest in Byron (and to which he had returned in retirement) he had been able to rise through the ranks of university administration to become, at career end, Vice Chancellor of Liverpool and, for two years, President of Universities UK, the pre-eminent meeting of all University Vice Chancellors and Principals in this country.

He therefore spoke out of significant experience of the sector. A number of themes were to the fore. The first was to acknowledge the privileged status of the university academic, and a career which, for all its drawbacks, was still one to be envied. At the same time there is no doubt that the University and the specific Research culture that it funds is coming under ever increasing pressure, and there is no sign that things will become better in the short term. He also acknowledged the seemingly inevitable tensions that exist between the demands of teaching and research on the one hand and the intractable claims of administration and government policy (and politicisation) on the other. The academic is caught in the middle. Having said all this, however, there is a need for prospective academics to recognise that management is both necessary and a skilled aspect of what the University does. Any individual therefore hoping for a career within its walls would be wise to equip him or herself with appropriate skills in management.

**A Final Word:** After hearing about the “perils of success” from Lesley Chamberlain, the final speaker at the Conference was left with a rather invidious task. **Iain Cameron**, the Head of the Research Careers and Diversity Unit at Research Councils UK, addressed the conference on his own Unit’s area of expertise and student involvement. In a short presentation he was able to reinforce a number of aspects of postgraduate work that are at one level known but often not as fully appreciated as they might be, centering on the ways in which RCUK seeks to support the attainment of particular skills in research students, while also supporting their search for eventual employment and measuring the impact that their research might have both within the academy and beyond.

In one sense, therefore, the Conference had come full circle. Conceived as an opportunity to celebrate the diversity of research both within and beyond the academy, and therefore as an encouragement to those engaged with it (against a background that recognises the essential loneliness of the researcher) the Conference found itself confronted with the brute fact of what comes after the relatively halcyon days of such work are accomplished. It was to the credit of the speaker that, after three days of heady excitement (while considering the more esoteric questions aroused by research) we had to return to the mundane, but nevertheless vital, question of life “beyond the campus”.

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