

FOR SHE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW!

JULIA GOODFELLOW



With a European referendum looming on the early summer horizon and the publication of the HE Bill in May, there has been no better time to interview a major figure of our sector. I met Professor Dame Julia Goodfellow at the annual conference of the Bridge Group last February where she gave an inspiring speech on social mobility. Later, I was delighted to interview her. Here she discusses her journey as a woman, the challenges our sector is facing, Europe, and more. Julia is President of Universities UK and Vice Chancellor at the University of Kent. She was the first female Chief Executive of any Research Council. She was awarded a CBE in 2010.

It is wonderful to be interviewing you for GMT. To start with, let's have an insight into your journey so far. Tell us a bit about how being a woman affected this journey in terms of the opportunities you had and the choices you made.

I love science and studied it at O-level because for me they were the easiest subjects in which to get high marks in at school! At sixth form, I remember there were just five of us studying A-level Chemistry. We were very privileged to have one teacher just for us. Did I know it was different? A little bit, because there were so few of us and we got such good attention from the teacher. There has been a lot of analysis which shows that women from my generation who studied Physics had mainly been in single-sex schools – either private or grammar schools. There was fantastic tuition. I was very fortunate.

I went to the University of Bristol, which was great. However, interviews at other institutions would not be acceptable with comments such as 'we don't really like taking girls but because you have good grades we will'. But I loved doing physics and it started off my career; and during your career you have to remember that you won't always succeed at everything. Like men, you can fail at things. But I've had great supporters.

How can we accelerate the equality agenda for women in academia and the Sciences? Do you see that as an issue now?

I think there is still an issue. But you have to look at where specifically the problems lie. When we look at university students now, we know that more than 50% are women – whether undergraduate, postgraduate, full time or part time. This is true across the western world. We have just seen the Prime Minister speaking about young white men from poor neighbourhoods being the least likely to go to university whereas their female peers are going in greater numbers. There are also issues at undergraduate level over subject mix where you still find subjects like engineering or computer science with very few women on the course, whereas in subjects allied to medicine or teaching there are a large number of women. On balance, however, we see universities as very much female territory at the student level.

I have spoken for many years about women in science and I think the biggest problem now is the professoriate, which is only 22% women. But it is changing. I would say that universities should all be looking at their own internal promotion processes and making sure that they are fair and transparent. We are doing this at Kent, making sure that women are considered for promotions. We need to be able to transform people's careers in a positive way. We are seeing results, with more women being promoted.

Looking at IAG, what would your advice be to careers advice practitioners in order to aid the social mobility agenda?

Universities have done a lot for access but that doesn't mean there isn't more we can do. Universities including mine are looking at attainment of different groupings of students. There are a number of students who come in from non-traditional backgrounds with high expectations and they are not getting the same level of degrees than we might expect. Why? We are looking at that from across the board, at institutional level, and this includes student services and the careers service.

Staff are helping students throughout their time at university to get a good degree (with academic support) and a good job at the end of it (with careers support). The latter factor is imperative because it tells students how they can stand out in the labour market. When students first come to university they need to know what sort of things they can put on their CV to stand out. At Kent we try to offer a range of things: it can be volunteering for example and our students do phenomenally well in that – 100,000 hours last year, in fact.

Supporting all students has to be done sensitively and imaginatively. We need to support them to study abroad for example. Perhaps they can't do a year so how about a term? Why not try two weeks at one of our study centres in Brussels or Paris? It's about giving people the confidence to take up the opportunities we offer and also to help them with their CV.

Is it important for universities to keep investing in their delivery of IAG?

Absolutely. But it is not just about the traditional set up. You may have a small central careers service but that has to be embedded throughout the university. At Kent, for example, some schools are fantastically good are getting their students to study or work overseas, others at work experience. I think what

universities have to work on is to offer a package of options.

What effect do you see degree apprenticeships having on the traditional model of degree delivery?

I think an important one. One effect we saw with the introduction of £9,000 fees was the drop in part-time students, not in full-time students. It was typically mature students, and it was also people studying at sub-degree level. Having worked at Birkbeck for many years, I am clear that we need to do all we can to support those that choose to study and work at the same time.

Which brings us to the next question: How can we look to improve our work with SMEs?

In Kent, there are a lot of small and micro-businesses. So at the University we have an innovation centre and enterprise hub where we bring together people from local companies to provide networking opportunities and support. Students can also use the enterprise hub as a base to run their own businesses. We think very broadly at Kent about working with SMEs whether it is through KBS, our business school or through our central Kent Innovation and Enterprise Group.

What do you think policy and employers miss out on by focusing on Russell Group universities?

I don't think that is the case that employers just focus on Russell Group universities – things have changed. I think that when you talk to graduate employers, they are looking much more widely now, especially around the social mobility agenda. They are not so worried about what discipline their degree is in but are looking for that 'extra' – evidence of a rounded person. Because of the social mobility agenda, they don't want to take a rigid person into their firm but someone who can evolve throughout their career. When I talk to graduate employers, they say that they are recruiting broadly across universities.

How united is our sector and how united should it be?

The traditional universities really feel that they are a sector. They are continuing to work together, albeit recognising differences in HE policy across the Devolved Administrations. There are many things that UUK tries to get out there, through publications showing how universities are contributing to their regions, to business, to social mobility etc. Recently Nicola Dandridge, the chief executive of UUK, was asked by government to Chair a group on social mobility and she is taking that forward. All these things we do together as a sector are integral to our institutions but of course every university has its own strengths and priorities.

What are your views of the impact of a possible Brexit on the sector?

Let's look at sector level first. We discussed this at UUK over a year ago and we unanimously supported a pro-Europe stance. Only recently Nicky Morgan said that young people would benefit from being in Europe. We said that a year ago. There is a cultural aspect – universities are all about broadening your horizons and so we should make it easy for our students to go to Europe and for Europe to come to us. I had a wonderful letter from one of our alumni saying how going to Europe and looking outwards gave him the confidence to go and work in America, something which he never ever envisaged before.

Then there is the big financial aspect because the EU provides funding for student mobility and research and universities will lose massively if we leave. At Kent, we call ourselves the UK's European University. We have been focusing on Europe for a long time. We've got study centres in Brussels, Paris, Athens and Rome. We certainly want to be linked with Europe.

What are your views on last year's HE Green Paper?

The Green Paper focused on excellence and I don't think anybody in education can say anything against excellence. In the UK we have, through our quality structures, always looked at enhancing what we are already doing. Anything that enables us to enhance the total student experience – the teaching, the learning and all those extracurricular things we have spoken about – we are very much happy to work with. UUK has indicated this in our written responses to government and we are now waiting for their response. We believe that there should be legislation to set up the Office for Students which will be taking on the role of protecting and looking after students. In some ways this comes naturally from the student loans system, as we no longer get a large block grant from HEFCE. What we are looking at is a change of architecture to the system. Again, we need to see the details.

In terms of the research aspect of the Green Paper – or changing the research agenda, as per the Nurse Review – we are waiting for a more detail and we may well need legislation to establish R-UK, the proposed overarching research body.

The third area where we would want to see legislation is around alternative new providers. I certainly think students should be able to choose where they want to go and I think all institutions have to be clear on the sort of provision we are given. But we need to make sure that courses are quality controlled at a high threshold. This is also important for our international student intake since they are looking for quality. Whoever the provider is, we need to reassure all students that they will get a high quality teaching experience.

Julia, thank you! Your voice is very important to us as a sector and I would urge all our readers to connect with the great work the UUK is doing!

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