

Opening Doors to the United Kingdom

An interview with British Council Chair Lord Kinnock

LORD NEIL GORDON KINNOCK HAS HAD A DISTINGUISHED CAREER in British politics and today is chair of the British Council and president of Cardiff University, the seventh largest university in the United Kingdom (UK). He was a Member of Parliament (MP) from 1970 to 1995, and was Leader of the Opposition and Labour Party leader from 1983 to 1992, when he resigned after the 1992 general election defeat. He subsequently served as a UK commissioner of the European Commission from 1995 until 2004.

IE interviews Lord Kinnock about Prime Minister Tony Blair's initiative to bring 100,000 international students to the UK by 2011.

IE: Prime Minister Tony Blair announced plans to attract 100,000 overseas students to the UK over the next five years. Why do you think this has been recognized as an important priority for the UK?

KINNOCK: Well, there are several reasons of pretty much equal importance. First of all, there's the consideration that it's the right thing for the knowledge economy. That, by definition, is a global concept and it means that the UK is interested in attracting talent at undergraduate and graduate levels as well as making a direct contribution to the economic and technological development of the countries across the world. So there's the knowledge economy consideration, which is basic.

Secondly, we derive great advantage from having multinational student bodies. Young people from other countries enrich campuses, courses, and communities, and give an international dimension to every subject area. That obviously works to the benefit of the British students who study alongside them.

Thirdly, there is what could be called the public diplomacy argument. It is that relationships, usually lifelong relationships, with the United Kingdom are established at higher education levels. Obviously, that

has great potential—both cultural as well as trade, economic, and political potential for the UK.

IE: With international student mobility increasing worldwide, why does the UK want a market share? How does this effect the UK's economy overall?

KINNOCK: There is certainly a material consideration. The fact is just at higher education level, the students that we currently attract in the United Kingdom are worth about five billion pounds a year in external trade in terms of invisible exports. That's about half of our total earnings from international education of various types. Obviously, it's a very significant area in the United Kingdom as well, but that's only alongside the other considerations, which I think are probably considered to be the educational, the knowledge economy, and the political relationships are at least as important.

IE: Do international students in the UK sometimes stay on to work, and does that have an economic advantage for your nation?

KINNOCK: Yes, and this applies not simply to what we call international students, but also students who come here from the other European Union countries,



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Lord Kinnock

who are treated as if they were domestic students. But they also bring a strong multicultural influence, and they often stay to continue their studies or to embark upon their careers. About 39 percent of all postgraduate research in the United Kingdom is currently undertaken by non-UK postgrads. That gives some idea of the number or the degree of importance that international post grads have in our research sector.

About 35,000 international students have undertaken research in UK universities at the moment. The projection by 2010 is that there will be more international postgraduates than undergraduate students studying in the UK contributing manifestly to the so-called knowledge economy. So both from the non-EU countries and from the EU countries, international students at the postgraduate level make a significant contribution to the development of knowledge and learning in the UK, and also, as they embark upon their careers, they are immensely useful, qualified members of the labor force.

IE: How will the larger numbers of foreign students coming into the country with the Blair initiative affect the higher education system that's already in place?

KINNOCK: Today about five percent of university undergraduates in the UK are international students. We could probably accommodate about a 10 percent proportion of our total number of undergraduates without having to make substantial increases in teaching and accommodation capacity. Obviously, there would be effects because we don't want classes to be too large, but the adjustment would not have to be huge.

IE: Do you think UK faculty members will modify their teaching methods to accommodate multiple learning styles in university classrooms due to the larger number of foreign students in the future?

KINNOCK: To some extent UK faculty members may modify their teaching methods. But all the reports that we have, including from my own university, I'm president of Cardiff University—it's Britain's seventh biggest now—is that our teaching staff does slightly modify their teaching practices already to take into account the multiplicity of languages, size of classes, and so on. It's not a huge adjustment but it's a challenge. An overwhelming majority of faculty enjoy the challenge simply because it's a fresh teaching demand to teach multiculturally and take advantage of a multicultural and multilingual path.

There is a body in the United Kingdom, which is called the Higher Education Academy (HEA). It brings together several hundred university provosts that collaborate to continue to develop policy and practice on providing a high quality of teaching service to the mixture of students, and largely because of their activities, the challenge of teaching in multicultural classrooms is very well managed.

IE: How will the British Council support the initiative to increase foreign student enrollment by 100,000 students in the next five years and how has the British Council advocated increasing the accessibility of higher education in the UK to date?

KINNOCK: First, I must clarify two points. One, we substantially tallied the prime minister's earlier initiative to increase foreign student enrollment. We provided about half of the financing, and, together with universities, we provided the policy navigation with some input from the government. And it was hugely successful, exceeded target by 60 percent, hit the targets in less than four years. It was a five-year strategy.

So the second thing we then did, of course, was to sustain the argument for continuity of the prime minister's initiative, and we were delighted when this year an agreement was reached on that, not least because it is a much more strategic approach. Also, it's a much stronger partnership approach because it involves the universities, the government, and the British Council, each of us contributing about a third of the total funding of just over 15 million pounds for the first two years of the initiative (the funding for the remaining three years has yet to be finalized.).

So it's shared. It's a partnership in a much more sophisticated way. It's strategic in a much more sophisticated way. And it's got the realistic target number, which may even be exceeded. It's realistic and challenging but it means that a real effort will have to be put in. Now how do we support it? Right at the core of the British Council's mission for the last 70 years—since we've existed—has been the prediction that international learning is international understanding, as well obviously as opportunity, and creativity, and freedom. We urged the strategy; we will execute the strategy. We will play



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our part financially and organizationally, and we'll do it not only in this country, but in the promotion policies of, knowledge of, understanding of, both the breadth of British courses and the facilities available in furthering higher education in the UK.

Of course, with 250 offices in 109 countries, we can devise a face-to-face contact as well as Internet communication and telephone communication, so that the potential students can raise their questions, get straight, factual answers, have access to information, which wouldn't be possible if we weren't facilitating organization of this scheme.

IE: How are your marketing efforts structured?

KINNOCK: We use modern technology and information technology obviously, and we use correspondence. We've got help desks, all the other things. But the most important and effective of all of marketing "strategies," the most effective by far is the personal recommendation from people who have experience of British higher education. They are the most effective marketers of the opportunities in the UK. Nothing compares with that, not even the best produced literature or the most effective entities.

We start off with an advantage in that we have huge operations, not just teaching English, but also in providing and facilitating the various British examinations. Those are huge numbers—it's in excess of 300,000 young people this year outside the European Union, will be sitting their qualification exams with various British examination authorities, with papers provided, invigilated, collected, and organized by the British Council. So the first and highly dependable point of contact as they are developing their education is the British Council, and they've had, in some cases, eight or nine years in which to discover our integrity.

So that really is a very significant basis for their interests in continuing their education in the United Kingdom. And then of course when they've got questions, they can raise them through the variety of forms and they will get absolutely authentic advice and information from the Council however they approach us.

IE: With the new five-year initiative to bring 100,000 more foreign students to the UK, will the British Council change how they educate prospective students about higher education opportunities?

KINNOCK: We will continue to do what we've been doing. With the first initiative, we found that it didn't stretch our capacity. In fact, what it did was to help us develop even more focused techniques in the offices that we've got rather than having to add staff or going to some sort of new model of organizational activity because the majority of people who work for us in the various countries are citizens of those countries. They want to do everything they can to facilitate the educational fulfillment of the young people from their countries.

So we've got a very strong personal motivation, as well as having the back up of high quality information and the people connecting

the inquirers of the information, all speaking in the same language, familiar with the British system, tested sources of vital information.

And then we very deliberately discussed a successor initiative, which took us almost exactly a year since the first one ended in only 2005. But it developed in the way that we wanted to see it and Tony Blair wanted to see it. But organizationally, and in funding terms, and agreeing on the partnership, in all, it took about 12 months.

IE: Along with the plan to attract more foreign students in coming years, Blair also calls for more research projects, exchanges, and joint degrees between campuses in the UK and abroad. What is the British Council's part in this? Why is this goal important?

KINNOCK: Well, our part in all of this is literally to facilitate in every way. In some cases that becomes very specific in that we are the organization that delivers the strategy. In other cases, of course, there's a much stronger input from either a government department, or particular universities, or both. But we facilitate in those cases, too. Our facilitation extends from just giving a helping hand, telling people who to call and all of that at the right school, to actual management of these relationships.

Now already we've got the United Kingdom Charter Education Initiative started in 2004. The British Degrees in Russia Project (BDRP) started in 2003 and this year on the same day that we announced prime minister's new initiative to increase foreign student enrollment, we started the United Kingdom-India Education and Research Initiative (UKIERI), which is a real partnership operation not only between British partners, the government council, universities, but also British companies operating particularly in India, and the Indian government and Indian universities and companies.

We've got a big bundle of interests, governmental, educational, public diplomacy, and the public and private sector in order to facilitate the flow of undergraduate and postgraduate students between the UK and India, but also particularly to nourish postgraduate research both in the UK and India. In addition, this goes right into the schools as well in the United Kingdom and India. It isn't confined to higher education, although that's where most of the activity will take place.

So we've got a series of other activities in addition to what has become traditional activities where we're building up the teaching and research entities and the flow of qualified students and researchers in two directions, export as well as import, because we think that that's realistically where the future profile of international education is.

In addition, there are large number of British universities that are providing higher education facilities in a variety of ways. Eighty percent of British universities are involved in delivering degree programmes outside of the UK. With innovations in delivery and developing quality assurance schemes, it is no longer necessary for students to study full time in the UK to access a wide and varied range of education opportunities. Students can earn degrees through

distance learning like our Open University does, online learning, teacher systems where periodically British university teachers will go to another country to deliver part of the course content, enrolling in branch campus, completing part of studies at a franchise university and then transferring to the UK and pursuing joint degrees.

IE: What is the role of distance learning in international higher education?

KINNOCK: It's substantial and it's going to get bigger. In fact, I think that it will be the major thrust of international education by 2020. It comes in a variety of forms. My definition of full distance learning entails students study independently using textbooks, interactive media, online resources, study materials from that university, frequently tailored from the course, as well as more general text, and the technique used has been developed since 1966 by our Open University. It has been extremely successful. It often involves occasional meetings with designated tutors. But we won't be prolonged at meetings when the classroom is the planet. Then there's online learning for part or whole courses. For instance, the University of Liverpool's M.B.A. program is completely online and that's been very successful. There are also branch campuses. For example, last year, the University of Sunderland was graduating its first Kenyan students who had never

been anywhere near Sunderland in northeast England in their lives. I spoke to the vice chancellor and he told me that the Kenyan student's quality of the work was absolutely outstanding. They graduated in a ceremony in Nairobi in February 2005. Other examples include the University of Nottingham's campuses in Malaysia and China and The University of Manchester's campus in Cairo. It's a concept that many international educators in the United States are familiar with because there are a lot of U.S. campuses across the world.

IE: With this thrust toward distance learning now, do you think it's becoming more acceptable to have a degree obtained in that form, and do you think the trend of receiving a degree via distance education is going to continue?

KINNOCK: Yes, I think it's become more acceptable and that will continue as long as there is no compromise with quality. Plus, there is all of the evidence that the universities are unwilling to risk their reputation by diluting quality. So as long as that gold standard is maintained, and I'm certain it will be so far as UK universities are concerned, that will continue. It means that many students, especially poorer students, can adjust the pace of their advancement to a degree and beyond it in a way that takes account of their life demands—working to earn wages, family obligations, business obligations, and so on. And distance learning really does facilitate that and, of course, it's a lot cheaper than coming to live in the UK for an extended period.

IE: What do you think the trends in international education are for the future in terms of more students possibly gaining degrees out of their home countries?

KINNOCK: Well, I think that for awhile we will continue to see intensifying competition for an increasing number of students across the world who want to undertake international education either because there are facilities in their own countries or because a particular specialty or a desire for a particular form of experience makes the youngsters turn out. However, I think that there will be a peaking of demand. I can't tell you the date; I think it's probably in the next decade, mainly because of the development of distance learning and the development of improving facilities in the home countries.

At the moment, all I can see is intensifying competition. Whether it's from Australia, which it's making a huge investment currently, as well as Canada and New Zealand, or from the continental universities in France, in Germany, or in the Nordic countries who are now providing undergraduate courses through the medium of English, we will see countries compete for international students. Many countries now, including countries in the southern hemisphere. Malaysia, for instance, are increasingly active. I don't think the demand will be absorbed by that increasing supply. I think the demand will change as facilities for learning and research become sophisticated in more places.

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