*Promoting social benefit can help Education and Cultural sectors when others will be at the front of the negotiating queue*

Rebecca Hughes, Director of Education, British Council

The Education and Cultural sectors are going to come up against some real competition for negotiating space and ‘airtime’ in the negotiations around BREXIT. Other sectors such as financial, automotive, and agriculture with well-understood ties to jobs and imports will clearly be at the front of the queue.

A seasoned EU policy maker recently suggested at an event I attended that the Higher Education and cultural sectors’ needs and interests are going to come into focus in the minds of negotiators a long, long way down the process of formal extrication from the European Union; if they ever do become a priority at all. This perspective was a good, if harsh, dose of reality.

It has made me think long and hard about how to explain to a general public the features of international education and culture I take for granted as immensely valuable to society.

Too often lobbying for these sectors can sound like the pulling up of the ladder of an elite that is out of touch with society. Why does a University or Museum down the road losing some EU funds matter to the woman on the Clapham omnibus or our family and friends? Why should the average citizen of the UK care about young people potentially losing access to mobility schemes such as ERASMUS Plus?

Those of us who work in international education and cultural relations see multiple issues looming and we spend a lot of time talking about them. We discuss regulatory quagmires, funding cliffs, and blocks on the free movement of people. Mobility is presented as the circulatory life-blood of cultural ties, education and research. Barriers to free movement clearly seem a terrible thing for, er, cultural ties, education and research.

For the majority of people, however, it’s worth noting that these issues can seem quite arcane or even self-interested. And it is the (slim) majority that has spoken. We need rather urgently to reconnect with the social values of international education and culture and to demonstrate the benefits most particularly to those who see them as irrelevant or arcane.

We need, for instance, to explain -- with good data and stories that engage people’s hearts and minds -- why international mobility is the circulatory life-blood for society rather than for education and culture per se. Let’s take the case of Universities.

Universities are not well-understood institutions. From the outside Universities seem (if the voting public think about them at all) like big schools with big buildings, quite a lot of money other resources, and not a lot of connection to the world around them. Those who fund them, those who pass through them as students, those who work in them, and the general public all see them quite differently. Behind the scenes they balance public good, charitable purpose, research and education, and commercial drivers. They work to, and care about, multiple stakeholders and masters. Between them they generate at a conservative estimate around 10 billion for the UK economy and international education is the 5th largest export sector.

At the end of the day, to different degrees, the HE sector carries out two functions that are vitally important to everyone (including the sectors that will be at the front of the negotiating queue) and these activities need to be promoted much more clearly:

* Higher Education gives students knowledge that helps societies thrive, engage, and adapt to complex changes
* Higher Education creates new knowledge to help societies grow and adapt sustainably as we put pressure on the planet and ourselves.

What can we learn from this more broadly? It strikes me overall that we are quite bad at promoting the benefits for society that cultural relations and international education – higher learning and engagement in its broadest sense – can bring. The difficulty that HE has had in making its case post the EU referendum despite impressive export figures tells me the world wants a more values-led conversation just now.

The values that underpin HE and much of cultural engagement and international education in general are worth holding on to these days more than ever. They are grounded freedom of thought and expression, openness to challenge, asking fundamental questions about how things work, and how they could work better, and of course free movement of people. But let’s not talk too much of our own needs, wants and values just now. Let’s mobilise some more good data and great evidence from our own and our partners’ work and demonstrate how these values create tangible value and relevance for our societies.

(783 words)