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Right Aims, Wrong Policy? Government Must Change Course on the Universities if the UK is to Retain World Lead Amongst Global Competitors.
Freedom, diversity and funding do matter, says Lord Rees in Politeia's new pamphlet.

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As universities become ever more competitive globally, not just in the USA but now in Asia, they attract the best scholars, students and greater levels of funding. However, UK universities are being held back by the burdens of government policy. Unless this changes, they could lose their historic global lead. In particular they need freedom: from burdensome regulation in research so scholars and scientists can follow judgement and 'hunches'; to play to their diverse strengths; and for a satisfactory balance to be struck on funding.

That's the message from **Martin Rees**, one of the UK's most distinguished scientists who also led two of our most prestigious institutions as President of the Royal Society and Master of Trinity College, Cambridge. Current policy is eroding the freedom to excel.

Lord Rees explains in Politeia's new study, *University Diversity: Freedom, Excellence and Funding for a Global Future*, that in four important respects, the current direction of policy is problematic. If our universities are to flourish, Government, along with the universities themselves, must play its part. In particular:

- **Greater Freedom and autonomy is needed for research institutions.** The UK's tradition in leading research has been the result of freedom where scholars and scientists could follow their hunch, without fitting in to Whitehall's targets and measures. No longer so. Today's 'Research Excellence Framework', which uses 'impact' criteria in awarding funding, limits this freedom in forming proposals. It concentrates too much on the short term, as the great successes of science illustrate:

'The inventors of lasers in the 1960s' says Lord Rees 'used ideas that Einstein developed 40 years earlier and could not foresee that their invention would be used in eye surgery and DVDs'.

- **A greater diversity of institutions, courses and teaching methods.** Across the world universities are changing: scientific clusters, liberal arts colleges, graduate universities offering professional qualifications, on-line learning and undergraduate courses of different lengths are among the success stories. If we are to compete for the future, diversity and excellence must be encouraged, by government no less than by the universities themselves.

- **Funding: Current arrangements for funding have left UK universities more burdened than competitors in the US and Europe.** The UK spends less on universities than most similar countries: 30 per cent below the OECD average in public investment in tertiary education and 40 per cent below the EU average. While it is well known that US universities have far more private funding, less well known is that the US is more generous with public funds, 1.2 per cent of GDP as against the UK's 1.1 per cent.

- **Access arrangements must change.** As official policy appears more keenly to entrench current access arrangements, Lord Rees identifies the real problem, failing schools, which must be tackled. But that will take time. In the meantime, why not learn from the Californian model. 'A substantial fraction of those who attend the 'elite' universities in the system such as Berkeley and UCLA have come not directly from high school but via a 'lower tier institution', explains Lord Rees. 'For those who initially did not gain entry to a Russell Group university because of disadvantaged schooling, it could become a common practice to transfer after one or two years at a less selective institution.'

These problems must be addressed if our universities are to compete for the future. Otherwise the UK risks jeopardising one of the few areas where it is a world leader. Even now, Britain will struggle even to retain its position, let alone improve it. As Lord Rees says: 'Our system needs greater diversity.... The current system is anything but a free market: fees are, in practice, narrowly constrained; there are quotas (inconstantly applied); and the degree of central regulation, and the 'strings' attached to public funding, are eroding autonomy.'

Martin Rees, Lord Rees of Ludlow OM, FRS, FBA is a Fellow of Trinity College and Emeritus Professor of Cosmology and Astrophysics at the University of Cambridge. He is the Astronomer Royal and Visiting Professor at Imperial College London and at Leicester University. He was Master of Trinity College (2004-12) and President of the Royal Society (2005-10). He became a life peer in 2005 and sits on the cross benches in the House of Lords.

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The pamphlet was launched by Lord Rees at Politeia on Friday 19th October at 12pm.