

## Local Lives vs Global Goals: Could Keele focus on our region or the wider world?

### Summary

The second Keele Debate explored whether universities could prioritise global influence or focus more directly on the needs of their surrounding communities. Speakers examined how institutions like Keele balance international research, partnerships and reputation with their responsibilities to local communities. The discussion highlighted tensions between global ambition and regional engagement, particularly in areas that have experienced economic decline. Panel contributions also considered how universities can support local regeneration while continuing to participate in international research networks and global collaboration.

### Introduction

The debate took place at Keele University as part of the Keele Debate Series led by Vice-Chancellor Professor Kevin Shakesheff. The event brought together speakers from across academia, policy and community organisations to examine how universities can balance global research ambitions with responsibilities to their surrounding regions.

The event was attended by over 300 participants across both in-person and online formats.

### The Panel

1. **Sir Tristram Hunt** – Director of the V&A and former MP for Stoke-on-Trent Central
2. **Dr Alicia Greated**- Executive Director of Campaign for Science and Engineering
3. **Carol Shanahan OBE** - Chair of Port Vale Football Club
4. **Cllr Martin Murray** - Acting Leader of Staffordshire County Council and Cabinet Member for Economy and Skills
5. **Joan Walley** - Former MP for Stoke-on-Trent North

Chaired by **Professor Kevin Shakesheff** - Vice-Chancellor, Keele University.

### Key Themes

#### a) **Global Engagement and Local Heritage**

Several speakers emphasised that global influence and local identity could not be viewed as competing priorities. Tristram reflected on the industrial heritage of Staffordshire, referencing figures such as Josiah Wedgwood and the historical importance of the Potteries in shaping the region's global reputation. From this perspective, global engagement can grow from strong local foundations.

Rather than separating “global” and “local” priorities, the panel suggested universities could use their international networks and research strengths to support regional economic development and community opportunities.

### **b) Universities and Regional Inequality**

Other speakers focused on the economic and social inequalities that persist within the region. Joan Walley highlighted that while universities like Keele may perform well internationally, nearby communities such as Stoke-on-Trent continue to face significant challenges. She also noted how institutional partnerships- such as the development of Keele’s medical school and collaborations with the NHS- demonstrate how universities can contribute directly to regional needs.

These examples illustrated how universities can connect global research expertise with local healthcare, education and economic development initiatives.

### **c) International Research and Public Trust**

Dr Alicia Greated emphasised the importance of maintaining international collaboration, particularly given current geopolitical tensions and global challenges. She argued that universities could continue to engage internationally while ensuring that research benefits local communities as well.

She also noted that public trust in universities is closely linked to whether research outcomes are visible and accessible. If communities feel excluded from the benefits of academic work, universities risk being perceived as distant or elitist institutions. For this reason, speakers stressed that global research ambitions could be accompanied by meaningful local engagement.

### **Questions from the Audience**

Audience contributions expanded the discussion and introduced additional perspectives. Key questions included:

- What industries might replace traditional sectors such as mining and pottery that once supported the local economy?
- Could universities prioritise international reputation if local communities feel left behind?
- How can Keele ensure its research benefits local communities as well as global partners?
- What practical steps could the university take to strengthen engagement with local residents?
- Could higher education be made more accessible through reforms such as free tuition or changes to student loan repayment?

In response, panellists suggested a range of possibilities for regional development. Cllr Martin Murray highlighted the potential role of technology and innovation, while Tristan

emphasised opportunities in tourism linked to Staffordshire's industrial heritage. Walley pointed to healthcare and food security as areas where universities could support future economic growth.

Audience questions also reflected broader concerns about the relationship between universities and their surrounding communities. Several contributors raised the issue of whether universities are sufficiently accessible to local residents, noting that some communities remain unaware of nearby higher education opportunities. Others emphasised the importance of strengthening partnerships with schools, healthcare providers and community organisations to ensure that universities contribute directly to regional wellbeing.

Overall, the audience discussion reinforced the central theme of the debate: how universities can balance international ambition with meaningful engagement in the communities that surround them.

### Arguments For and Against Prioritising Global or Local Impact

The debate reflected wider discussions across the higher education sector about the role universities could play within society.

Supporters of global engagement emphasised that international collaboration is essential for modern universities. Global research partnerships allow institutions to address complex challenges such as climate change, health crises and technological development. Alicia argued that international cooperation is fundamental to academic progress and that universities could remain open to global networks if they are to remain competitive and innovative.

However, other speakers highlighted concerns that global ambitions can sometimes distance universities from the communities in which they are located. Murray spoke about his experiences growing up in Cannock, suggesting that many people from similar areas feel disconnected from higher education institutions. He argued that universities could focus more strongly on encouraging local participation and addressing what is often described as "brain drain", where talented individuals leave their regions rather than contributing to local development.

Carol Shanahan emphasised that universities can play a significant role in tackling social challenges such as child poverty and inequality, referencing initiatives like the Keele Institute of Social Inclusion and the Hubb Foundation. From this perspective, universities have a responsibility not only to pursue global excellence but also to support social mobility and community wellbeing within their surrounding regions.

Ultimately, the debate suggested that global engagement and local responsibility could not necessarily be viewed as opposing goals. Instead, universities may need to find

ways of ensuring that international research and collaboration also produce meaningful benefits for local communities.

### Student Perspective

Student reflections on the debate highlighted a range of responses to the discussion. While many recognised the value of international research partnerships and global collaboration- particularly in addressing large-scale challenges such as healthcare, climate change and technological innovation- others noted that the debate often reinforced their existing views rather than significantly changing them.

Some students found particular speakers more convincing, especially when arguments were grounded in practical experience or spoke directly to structural issues within higher education. At the same time, others felt that the discussion did not always present sufficiently contrasting perspectives, with some arguments leading to similar conclusions despite being framed differently. For these students, the debate prompted further critical reflection, with some leaving more sceptical about the current balance between global ambition and local responsibility.

Overall, student responses reflected the complexity of the issue. While there was broad agreement that universities could remain globally engaged, many students emphasised the importance of ensuring that this engagement translates into meaningful benefits for local communities. The discussion reinforced the idea that universities could balance international ambition with a clear commitment to accessibility, regional development and social impact.

### Strategic Takeaway

The debate raises important strategic questions for Keele University concerning the balance between local engagement and global ambition.

The emphasis on regional impact suggests that universities may need to reconsider how they define and demonstrate their civic role, particularly in supporting local communities, addressing regional inequalities, and contributing to economic development. At the same time, this raises questions about how such commitments can be maintained alongside the pressures of global competition and international collaboration.

The discussion also highlights the potential value of integrating local and global strategies, rather than viewing them as competing priorities. This points towards opportunities for universities to align regional engagement with broader research, teaching, and partnership activities.

A further tension emerges between place-based identity and institutional growth, suggesting that universities may need to think carefully about how expansion, reputation, and mission are balanced.

While the strategic implications are less prescriptive, the debate highlights the need for institutions to adopt a more integrated and reflective approach to their role within both local and global contexts.

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