



Europe's academies ask: are we in a 'post-truth' world?

US scholars will also be involved in new push to understand if the public still values expertise

September 9, 2017



By [David Matthews \(/author/david-matthews\)](#)

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Europe's academies are to launch a major investigation into whether public trust in experts has collapsed in the so-called "post-truth" era.

All European Academies (Allea), which brings together 40 bodies including the UK's Royal Society and Germany's Leopoldina, said that "in response to current challenges" it would look into "the alleged loss of trust in science and evidence, its underlying causes, the way different disciplines are dealing with it, and questions on how valid knowledge can and should be acquired".



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A working group will be co-chaired by Baroness O'Neill of Bengarve, one of the foremost academic experts on trust.

She said she hoped that the group would "achieve some clarity" about where expertise was as respected as it ever had been, and also identify areas where there had been genuine change.

The Allea group also includes José van Dijck, president of the Dutch Academy of Arts and Sciences, as well as representatives of academies in Sweden and Turkey. It will also sound out views from the American Academy of Arts & Sciences, according to an Allea spokeswoman.

The group, which has yet to flesh out specific questions or potential solutions, will begin work this month. But Lady O'Neill, an emeritus professor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-cambridge>), said that she personally thought that some of the fears around a "post-truth" society were "overblown".

One of the most famous examples concerns Michael Gove, one of the leaders of the Leave campaign during the UK's Brexit referendum, who earned the ire of many academics by declaring during an interview before the vote that "the people in this country have had enough of experts".

Mr Gove was actually cut off by the interviewer while he made his infamous remarks, Lady O'Neill pointed out. In fact, his point was a more specific one about economists, she said. In a paper delivered at a conference on trust last month at University College Dublin (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/university-college-dublin>), she argued that "we do not live in a 'post-truth' society in which truth claims do not matter, or are all faked, in which nobody meets their commitments, or in which we can be indifferent to practical expertise".

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Instead, "our problem is rather that it is often hard and time-consuming to find a basis for trusting specific claims, commitments and competence, particularly when complex technologies and institutions influence, shape – and sometimes falsify – the evidence we can obtain", she argued.

The shift to consuming information online has also "undermined some traditional systems of quality control", she said in the paper. Improving citizens' "digital literacy" was unlikely to be enough to allow them to "navigate" this new world of information safely without "signposts", she told *Times Higher Education*.

Ed Noort, Allea's vice-president and the group's other co-chair, suggested that one way to better connect academia with the public could be to conduct large-scale surveys to see what questions people wanted investigated. He thought the group could explore this, which had been trialled in the Netherlands with about 12,000 respondents, whose ideas had then been filtered down by academics to inform research priorities.

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READER'S COMMENTS (1)

#1 (/comment/20697#comment-20697) Submitted by Isabel Verdadera on September 9, 2017 - 9:40pm

Baroness O'Neill's comments are refreshingly clear, clever and critical, qualities which most journalists and academics who have written about the 'post-truth era' seem to lack. If only all intellectuals would agree that it is important to gather evidence patiently and systematically before making inflated claims.

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