

Supplementary written evidence from Professor Wooldridge

Liaison Committee on AI – October 2020 - Supplementary Evidence

At the end of our evidence session in the 14 October 2020 session of the House of Lords Liaison Committee on AI, Lord Clement Jones asked for a one-word answer to the question “Do you think we are as internationally competitive now as we were when we looked at this as a Select Committee?” Despite having been extremely positive about the UK’s AI initiatives during the evidence session, I answered “no” (albeit with some hesitation). So, let me unpack my answer a little.

Since the committee first met in October 2017, the UK has energetically pursued a number of different activities around AI, including the establishment of the AI council, Centres for Doctoral Training in AI (via EPSRC), attractive funded fellowship schemes for top AI researchers, and so on. All of this has been pretty much universally welcomed within the UK AI community, and I am very happy to go on record as clearly stating that I am delighted the UK was able to initiate these activities so swiftly and decisively. They will play an important role in maintaining the UK’s position in AI over the coming decades.

So why do I not feel able to state that we are as competitive now as we were in 2017? There are two reasons.

First, the rest of the world has also responded. On this side of the Atlantic, France and Germany have launched a range of similar initiatives, while in North America, both the US and Canada have responded likewise. China has continued to invest in AI on a staggering scale, through private and public routes, and has continued its rapid ascent of the AI league tables. Many other smaller nations have also reported similar initiatives. So, the international goal posts have moved.

Second, and as I alluded to in my verbal evidence on 21 October, my honest sense is that the UK’s reputation as a home for international talent has taken something of a battering over the past few years. I emphasise this is not a political point: I am simply reporting on the basis of my personal experience, as someone whose job involves attempting to attract (and retain) world class researchers to the UK. I personally know of leading international AI researchers who were perfectly content working in the UK, who became frustrated and disillusioned by the tone of the

debate around our decision to leave the EU, and who subsequently relocated back to continental Europe as a consequence. In seemingly every discussion I have with an international researcher about the possibility of relocating to the UK, the issue comes up. One of the most frequently voiced concerns is about whether UK-based researchers will still be able to apply for funding from the European Research Council (ERC), which is the jewel in the crown of European Research Funding. If we eventually find that we cannot, then that will be hugely damaging.

So, the picture is complex. AI continues to develop at an unprecedented rate, and despite the international COVID downturn, the signs are that it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. We must continue to be energetic and dynamic and decisive in our approach to developing AI skills and attracting AI talent; and to recognise that we are not acting in a vacuum.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require clarification or have any queries at all.

Yours sincerely,

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21 October 2020