

University of London ‘safe haven’ for small institutes in marketised sector

New vice-chancellor of federal university to focus on boosting international programmes and ‘selling London brand’ post-Brexit

July 12, 2019

Ellie Bothwell

Times Higher Education Supplement



Source: University of London

Wendy Thomson, new vice-chancellor of the University of London, is not your typical university leader. Growing up with adoptive parents in a poor area of Montreal, she was, and still is, the first in her family to go to university.

Fast forward 40 years, she most recently worked as managing director of Norfolk County Council. Her previous roles include leading the Office of Public Service Reform in the Cabinet Office under Tony Blair, chief executive of the London Borough of Newham, chief executive of the charity Turning Point and director of the School of Social Work at Canada’s [McGill University](#).

This might seem like a varied and disparate career but Professor Thomson, who took up her London post on 1 July, said she has “always looked for places to work where you can make a difference to people’s lives”.

“If you look at any of the various work done on social mobility and inequality it always comes to education – that’s what’s going to be people’s route out of disadvantage. It certainly has been for me,” she added.

“I guess I bring a slightly different lens to the world of vice-chancellors than maybe is the typical image [of a vice-chancellor] that people might have. I don’t think there has been another woman [leading London] since the ‘50s.”

Her experience working for local and national government means that she understands how conversations with universities “sound out there” in the world of government, she said, adding that “it’s a dialogue that’s an important one to keep feeding and strengthening and it’s not one that happens that easily”.

“If you talk to most universities I imagine what they talk to their local authority about would probably be planning permission, student nuisance and occasionally something to do with the

industrial strategy,” she continued. “I think we can do more than that when you think of the social challenges that a city like London faces. How can we engage with that? How can they value the asset that we bring as a set of world-class institutions?”

One of Professor Thomson’s goals at London, which consists of 17 member institutions, is to enhance the university’s worldwide programmes, which have about 52,000 students across 180 countries.

“I think it could be the UK’s greatest educational export...but until I engaged with this job I had never heard of it,” she said.

She also hopes to “sell the London brand, which I think will be under threat post-Brexit” and ensure that the capital as a whole – which is home to the richest and poorest communities in the UK – benefits from the institution.

Widening participation is one of the ways in which universities can tackle the challenge of polarisation and “the populist attack on intellectual endeavour”, she said.

However, Professor Thomson said that the “marketisation framework in which higher education is being thought about these days isn’t always consistent with widening access”.

“Some of the metrics that are used to judge the success of institutions don’t encourage people to take a risk on more context-based admissions. I think we need to be brave enough to represent those interests,” she said.

Meanwhile, Professor Thomson labelled the Augar review of post-18 education and funding in England “ill-conceived”, adding that while the concern with further education is “a genuine issue”, the review says little more than “something ought to be done”.

In December, the new University of London Act was implemented, allowing member institutions to apply for university title. Professor Thomson said that the law is not a “big change” but “removes any remaining irritations about a dependency on the university as a mothership”.

However, she said that “there a real sense of belonging” among the members, adding that some of the small, specialist institutions “need to be part of something bigger because they don’t fit in the mould of the current national policy around higher education”.

“If the model assumes a marketisation of ever bigger institutions competing with each other on price and quality, then the [Courtauld Institute of Art](#) and the [Institute of Cancer Research](#) and the [Royal Academy of Music](#) are not made in that mould,” she said.

“The University of London in part is a safe haven and an advocate for those very specialist institutions, which are outstanding. It provides them a wider world in which to be a citizen.”

ellie.bothwell@timeshighereducation.com