

Curiosity and collaboration will remain the bedrock of university research in a post-Covid world

The value of curiosity-driven science, the benefits of collaboration and the rich, interconnected insight that universities bring when responding to challenges facing society were just three of the themes covered in our inaugural 'In Conversation With' event.

This was the first in a series of virtual discussions we are hosting designed to connect our senior supporters to leading insight on current issues. The series was introduced by the Chair of the University's Global Leadership Board, Simon Collins, who chaired a conversation between Brian Cox, Professor of Particle Physics and well-known documentary maker, and Professor Dame Nancy Rothwell, President and Vice-chancellor of the University of Manchester.

Challenge and opportunity

Dame Nancy, started the discussion by outlining the swift and comprehensive response to the pandemic from staff, students, alumni and donors. She told us that the coronavirus crisis and ensuing lockdown gave universities "an opportunity to re-think" how they operate.

In her view, "Things will change. There will be more done online, more done virtually." She used one word to sum up the most important aspect of the potential changes ahead: "collaboration". "If we are really going to solve today's and tomorrow's problems, and teach the next generation, we need to work together."

Professor Brian Cox, picked up the theme, "we are trying to understand how nature works. But, nature is interconnected. It's foolish to think you can do science in a silo." Professor Cox went on to give the example of Sir Paul Nurse, whose Nobel prize winning research came about through serendipity and that what may seem unconnected, may well be foundational. In that respect, any attempt to segregate science, "is bound to fail".

In response to a question on government support for research, Dame Nancy was upbeat. "There is a genuine commitment to fund fundamental science and solutions to real world solutions." Dame Nancy recalled a conversation with George Osbourne when he was asked why he was so supportive of research and responded by saying, "a knowledge economy is key to future success."

Patience and reflection

Professor Cox was asked to provide some perspective on the current crisis from a cosmological point of view. He stated that the list of existential threats has remained the same for the past few decades and includes pandemic. But, this is something we can control. From the point of view of cosmology, the universe is inherently unstable

and violent and we should not be surprised that we haven't found intelligent life. He believes there may only be one incidence of life in an entire galaxy of one billion stars. Therefore, it makes the current climate crisis all the more important, if we are the only example of life in our galaxy.

Simon Collins then opened the discussion up to the audience for further questions and debate. Dame Nancy and Professor Cox fielded questions from

- Richard Clegg on blue skies research and what can be done to spot and accelerate so as to maximise benefits.
- Simon Segars on research as the serendipitous interaction between people and the potential lost ground due to the lack of interaction that Covid-19 has forced.
- Lex Greensill on the efficacy of the decision of the UK government to invest £500mm in OneWeb.
- And to round off the evening, Edward Bonham Carter asked, "what makes you pessimistic about the future and what makes you optimistic?"

We were delighted to welcome our guests for a lively and thought provoking debate and thank them for their insights and contributions.

Please join us on 29 September for our next In Conversation with...event where we will be delighted to welcome Lord O'Neill.

As the university moves beyond its initial response to the pandemic, our attention has turned to the recovery phase. We are now applying our human and intellectual capital to those existing challenges from cancer to climate change as well as to the new, such as the search for a vaccine. This event was an occasion to showcase the University's cutting edge, integrated and innovative thinking. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss how you can help us realise the many transformational opportunities that will mark Manchester's critical role in the coming years.