

## **OECD Paris**

**IMHE Biennial Conference 13-15 September 2010 – Higher Education in a World Changed Utterly Doing More with Less**

**OECD Round Table on Higher Education in Regional and City Development 15-16 September 2010**

-----

These two meetings together provided an invaluable overview and debate on big issues confronting higher education following, or perhaps one should say in the midst of, the global financial crisis (GFC); and of its relationship to the world and the regions that HEIs inhabit. The Round Table was a work-in-progress workshop for regions involved in the 2<sup>nd</sup> round of OECD reviews of higher education in regional and (in this 2<sup>nd</sup> round of reviews specifically) city development. The emphasis on cities or city-regions in this second round well reflects the nature of many of the regions involved, and of others planning to join the 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle of work.

### **The Conference**

Some 500 people attended the IMHE two-yearly three-day conference. This combined several good keynote papers and panel sessions with three sessions of parallel group presentations. The final sessions extracted highlights from these groups and brought some threads together. Abstracts of all the presentations and papers were available in a 46-page booklet and can be accessed [on the OECD website](#).

Outstanding among the presentations were one by Charles Reed, Chancellor of California State University, and a closing keynote by University College London President Malcolm Grant. Both would warm the heart and revive failing passions among colleagues committed to university engagement or third mission; and rally those critical of the damaging side-effects of university rankings and world league tables, which Grant called ‘intellectual nonsense’. The latest global tables came out during the conference week and provided a buzz of incidental conversation. On Friday 17 September *Le Monde* carried a front page story entitled ‘[Le rude marche mondial de la matiere grise](#)’ supported by two pages on France’s poor ratings. This illustrated the effect of ratings on a proud national psyche, and the possible policy distortions that may follow. The danger was pointed out of rankings becoming a proxy for policies in an HE policy vacuum.

On 21 September the UK *Guardian* quoted Grant observing that ‘global rankings have afforded annual light entertainment, but are now seriously overreaching themselves... they still fall miles short of capturing anything like the variety, the dynamism and the diversity of the modern university’. This came from a university that ranks very high on five of the six competing tables cited by the *Guardian* ([also carried on dawn.com](#)). Charles Reed judged them to be unhealthy and even poisonous, echoing a word recently used by former vice-chancellor Roger Brown in a [letter](#) to the UK *The Times Higher* (15 July 2010). It was also observed how modest or absent was the regional and community contribution and engagement of research-

led elite universities in general – it will be interesting to see whether Mike Osborne and his colleagues can counter this trend via U21 – it is no easy matter.

Another good clear presentation was by Soumitra Dutta of INSEAD. He employed the well-known boiling frog metaphor apropos universities failing to respond to a deteriorating situation and environment until it was too late. If this happened it was proposed that we are ourselves to blame for commodifying higher education. Dutta offered the familiar option of dying all unknowing in a slowly heated pan, or plunging into hot water and leaping out while there was still time. I was left reflecting on a third option – maybe universities can metamorphose into entirely different species and still survive, like cockroaches after the holocaust!

It was stated that the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) was only a global phenomenon for six weeks, was essentially in and of the North, where ‘not one HEI in the United States had been untouched by the GFC’. Discussion about the reality and seriousness of GFC, as well as universities’ responses, ran through many conference sessions, with private sector speakers perhaps naturally dramatising the seriousness and the need for very radical (essentially private sector) solutions. Others called for more risk-taking to find innovative solutions. There were on the other hand well articulated calls to retain a balanced-mission ‘real university’ and not allow it to be shrunk down to skills training. Even in the main conference there was a preoccupying concern with regional innovation systems; John Goddard emphasised that the big issues were essentially social.

One speaker reminded the conference that not only the Great Depression but also both World Wars represented disruptions more savage than GFC. David Hazlehurst emphasised how well Australia has ridden out GFC, with a now expanding HE budget; across Europe most HE budgets are falling, or at best barely holding level. It was generally accepted that public funds would be in very short supply; but some speakers turned the expression round, saying that with new IT the challenge was not doing more with less but doing more with more. For Dutta, balancing academic research with an effective contribution to society (impact) is the holy grail.

For all the talk, a wry Dubliner’s comment from the floor at the end of the final session summed up a lurking dimension of the whole talkfest: the dominant instinct was simply to sit tight and tough it out.

## **The Round Table**

About 80 participants took part in the Regional and City Development Round Table. An intense day and a half of presentations gave a very informative overview of progress being made, as the final conference for this round of reviews approaches in Seville in February 2011. Presentations were however wider than regional reports: several addressed generic themes rather than the work of a particular region. Most 2<sup>nd</sup> round OECD review regions were represented, along with speakers from prospective 3<sup>rd</sup> round regions: Singapore, Wroclaw in Poland, and the North-East of Scotland, centred on the oil-rich city of Aberdeen.

The first four, very well presented, published review reports were available – on Amsterdam and Rotterdam in the Netherlands, on Berlin in Germany, and for the trans-border Paso del Norte region straddling Mexico and the United States into Texas and New Mexico (so was the very long and detailed self-evaluation report from Andalusia). With a roughly similar format, the four reports ranged from 29 pages of Assessment and Recommendations in the trans-border case and 25 pages for Berlin down to 7 pages for Amsterdam and two pages of key recommendations to Rotterdam.

The four reports themselves vary in length between 101 and 191 pages. Each sets the scene before three central chapters on regional innovation, human capital development, and social, cultural and environmental development, usually concluding with a consideration of capacity-building. In this way they follow in most respects the structure of the reports of the first round of OECD reviews, which is reflected in the summary monograph ([Higher Education and Regions. Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged, OECD 2007](#)). The difficulty with this format is the tendency to align regional innovation with university research, and human capital development with teaching. This leaves the third strand as an unaligned ragbag of non-economic dimensions – a curious echo of the unease with which the ‘third mission’ can find itself in a left-over university administrative ragbag outside the main teaching and research portfolios.

It is early days to draw across-the-board conclusions, in particular as to whether the set of studies will throw light on a question set for itself by the review process at the outset: is it better to invest in a *world class university*, or in a *high quality higher education system*? The robustly hostile judgement of leading speakers to global ranking in the preceding main conference might suggest one answer. At the least, evidence of the contribution of different policies and models to different regions’ development is highly desirable as an evidence base for such major differences of policy direction. Going further, we might suggest that regional groupings of institutions could be *collectively charged with the full range of educational and developmental missions* (knowledge-making, dissemination and application), with *shared and collective* rewards and penalties for achievement or failure across the whole portfolio.

All the information about the Round Table, including the presentations, is [on the OECD website](#).

### **Further Reflections**

These additional notes embody my own interests and reflections on points that came up. Each participant goes away from such events with their own selective memory.

Alice Frost, spoke (at the Round Table) of *cultural change in UK universities*, and of HEIF IV in HEFCE: 79% of HEIs now see knowledge exchange as embedded rather than an add-on. Each pound of HEIF money is reckoned to return £4-7. In referring to a broad basket of robust metric she also described them as ‘incredibly imperfect’; measuring impact was the Holy Grail. This need was touched on several times during the conference, whereas rankings were widely and roundly criticised.

Another speaker brought out the difference between the more indigenous and gradual – but therefore stronger – processes of innovation in Brazil, China and India, compared with the locally unanchored and non-relevant bought-in approach of the Gulf States, where cultural maturation is awaited.

It was hard at times to avoid a sense of universities being in a hole and digging deeper, although Goddard and others spoke of the need to move beyond the notion of the entrepreneurial to the civic university. Universities should cater for ‘four lives’: family, community, and civic or polity as well as the workplace. Peter Smith, Senior VP at Kaplan, emphasised the accelerating and more dramatic rate of change, with the vital shift in perspective to seeing determining forces as lying outside the academy. Here there was abundance in new teaching opportunities, unlike the scarcity of traditional HE which implies selectivity and weeding out. For Smith learning means extracting meaning from experience: a basis for lifelong learning but a paradigm shift still eluding mainstream of higher education.

If one were to seek one word for a widely sought ‘solution’ it might be *leadership*, especially institutional leadership. Unless this is qualified and explained however it says little; also it needs balancing with embedded cultural change, if change is to outlive the charismatic leader. It was extended by one speaker to encompass leadership within the region, where universities are now a force in the economic as well as the education sector. Without fine leadership and good governance arrangements there may be little capacity to adhere to a long-term approach which calls for longer tenure of post than prevailing ‘grasshopper leadership’ habits allow.

Virtually no discourse extended beyond universities into the wider terrain of tertiary education, as OECD Head of Division Richard Yelland observed. New private sector models certainly did feature, but for Malcolm Grant these tend to cherry-pick popular easy-profit areas rather than making balanced provision: ‘never before have we faced such great challenges to the fundamental values of universities’. There was frequent evidence of the need for a more encompassing and collaborative tertiary approach to policy-making and programme delivery, especially on the ‘human capital’ side. But equally evidently this is not easy: to take a memorable phrase from elsewhere in the meeting, ‘*cooperation needs effort, competition is spontaneous*’.

*Chris Duke September 2010*