

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 of and debate on big issues confronting higher education following, or rather perhaps one should say in the midst of, the global financial crisis; 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 2nd round of OECD reviews of higher education in regional and (in this 2nd 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 3rd cycle of work.

The Conference

Some 500 people attended IMHE's two-yearly three-day conference which combined several good keynote papers and panel sessions with three sessions of parallel group presentations. The final sessions sought to draw out highlights from these groups and to bring 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 those by Charles Reed, Chancellor of California State University, and in a closing keynote by University College London President Malcolm Grant. Both would warm the heart and revive any failing passions among colleagues committed to university engagement or third mission; and of those critically concerned about the damaging side-effects of university rankings and world league tables. The latest global tables came out during the conference week and provided some 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 such ratings on a proud national psyche, and the possible policy distortions that may follow. The point was forcefully made in the conference that rankings were in danger of becoming a proxy for policies within the uncertainty of an HE policy vacuum.

On 21 September the UK *Guardian* quoted Grant observing that 'global rankings have afforded annual light entertainment, but they 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*. 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 very good and clear presentation was by Soumitra Dutta of INSEAD, who employed the well-known boiling frog metaphor apropos universities failing to respond to a deteriorating situation and environment until it was too late. 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) solutions. Others also called for more risk-taking to find innovative solutions. There were on the other hand some 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 more savage disruptions than GFC. David Hazlehurst emphasised how well Australia has ridden out GFC, with a now expanding HE budget; across Europe most HE budgets were falling or at best barely holding level. It was generally accepted that public funds would be in very short supply; some speakers turned the expression around, saying that with new IT the challenge was not doing more with less but doing more with more. Dutta described balancing academic research with an effective contribution to society (impact) as the holy grail.

For all the talk, a wry Dubliner's comment from the floor at the end of the final session perhaps summed up a lurking dimension of the whole talkfest: he reckoned that 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 of the 2nd round OECD review regions were represented, along with speakers from the prospective 3rd round regions of 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). While having 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 providing three central chapters on regional innovation, human capital development, and social, cultural and environmental development, usually then 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, reflected in the summary monograph (*Higher Education and Regions. Globally Competitive, Locally Engaged*, OECD 2007). The difficulty with this format is the automatic tendency to align regional innovation with university research, and human capital development with teaching, leaving 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 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](#).

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