

## Richard Lewis



Richard Lewis has had a varied career in Higher Education. Following a period as Professor of Accountancy at the University of Wales, he occupied senior management positions in a number of institutions during which time the focus of his interest moved from resources to the not unrelated area of quality assurance. He was the Deputy Chief Executive of the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA), the degree awarding and quality assurance body for the Polytechnic and College sector of UK Higher Education. While at the CNAA he was responsible for the introduction of the first UK wide system of Credit Accumulation and Transfer. With the ending of the binary system in the United Kingdom in 1992, and the subsequent demise of the CNAA, his career took another turn when he joined the UK Open University (OU) - the country's leading distance learning provider. He served as Pro-Vice-Chancellor with special responsibility for services, both academic and administrative, provided to students. Early in his career he was a visiting Professor at the University of Washington, Seattle while later he spent two years in the United States as Interim and then Associate Chancellor of the United States Open University. Following his retirement from the OU he is actively engaged as a higher education consultant. He has extensive international experience and has served as a consultant in over 20 countries. He has also worked with a number of international agencies including the World Bank and UNESCO. He has been closely involved with the work of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) since its establishment in 1991; he served as its President from 2003 to 2007 and remains one of its Directors.

### **In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario for quality assurance in higher education?)**

#### Desirable

A system that has the following features

- That encourages Higher Education Institutions (HEI) to develop their own internal quality assurance procedures. That has an appropriate balance between internal and external procedures with the balance shifting to internal procedures as HEIs demonstrate the adequacy of their internal mechanisms
- A system that is flexible to recognise the very wide diversity in types of HEI from the large 500 year old university to the newly established specialist provider that may have only a handful of students.
- That is subject to a benign government that recognises the importance of an effective system of quality assurance for Higher Education but which does not seek to interfere with the running of the system but which nonetheless will play its part as a stakeholder on the part of the wider community and is prepared to step in if the system starts to fail.
- That does pay proper regard to output measurements in the broader sense but which also recognises that many of the important outputs of an HE system are not capable of measurement.
- That keeps a balance between having a positive relationship with its local community of institutions (which may not necessarily all be part of one jurisdiction) and relating to the

international community by, for example, being prepared to rely on the work of quality assurance bodies in other countries.

**In your opinion, what is or should be the most important objective for higher education in the future? Why?**

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To contribute to the social and economic benefit of all humankind.

**What do you consider to be the main future challenge(s) for higher education systems? Why?**

Money

The need to compete with other worthwhile causes for economic resources whether taxpayers money channelled through government or the same people's resources flowing through the commercial sector.

This is going to be a particularly problem in the case in those countries which will need to achieve significant increases in participation rates over the next half century. But it will also be problem for many developed countries especially those within aging populations.

Diversity

While quite a few countries have moved from elite to a more populist or even a mass system of higher education many of the features of the elite system remain. There is a real danger in many countries that HEIs that are not research intensive or otherwise exhibit the historical characteristics of an elite institution will be undervalued as will be their graduates.

**In your opinion, what would be the worst, but possible, way to tackle these future challenges? Why?**

Money

So far as teaching and learning are concerned retain the same model but spend less so that students will increasingly learn from redigested material, have even more reduced access to personal support and discussion groups and receive even less formative feedback.

I think there is a high level of risk attached to this scenario.

Diversity

The acceptance of a two tier system of higher education or possibly the relegation (either formally or informally) of many institutions from the higher education system. At its worst it could lead to a situation where there would in effect be two tiers of academic qualification with the graduates of the lower tier institutions finding it increasingly difficult to enter certain types of employment or progressing to universities in the upper tier.

To an extent elements of this scenario already exist. I think that there is good chance that the situation will deteriorate but to be positive I think the more extreme manifestation of the model will be avoided.

## **What do you consider to be the best possible way to tackle the above mentioned future challenges? Why?**

### **Money**

To minimise the chance of it happening or, to be more realistic, to lessen the impact the HE sector, and its champions, need to promote the benefits of HE to the wider community. As part of this campaign more attention needs to be given the social returns while not neglecting the economic returns.

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However, it is most unlikely that expenditure per student will be maintained at existing levels, especially in countries where student numbers are increasing significantly. In such circumstances the best that could happen would be to develop ways of teaching and learning that will enable to students to develop the desired range of subject specific and generic competences but at a lower cost, this will probably depend on a greater use of IT even for the campus-based student.

A more flexible approach to modes of learning could be adopted with less emphasis on the full-time campus based mode and more on the part-time, distance and especially blended learning modes.

### **Diversity**

The best approach is very much bound up with quality assurance. The system should be such as to ensure that the "minimum" standards that are associated with awards is at an acceptable level or that the "worst is good enough".

In addition greater emphasis should be given to the functions of higher education other than pure research viz applied research, the communication of knowledge, teaching and learning and service to community. Means should be found to identify and celebrate excellence in these fields and the view that the only excellent HEIs are successful research intensive universities needs to be resisted.