

Speech by Sir David Wallace, Master of Churchill College, Cambridge, at the 2008 Queen's Anniversary Prizes Banquet at the Guildhall, London

It is a great pleasure, and honour, to be able to say a few words this evening. This is a special occasion, and although of course one mustn't boast about the number of times one has attended a Queen's Anniversary Prize event, I surely should say I have enjoyed previous banquets!

And it is an enjoyable occasion because it is a celebration in several senses:

Most obviously it celebrates your success as Prize Winners this year – for you individually, for your teams and for your Institution. These are truly competitive awards – more than 600 eligible institutions, many with a wealth of potential candidates. So I add my own warmest congratulations to you all.

But this occasion celebrates more than that, because of the nature of the Queen's Anniversary Prizes and what they represent.

There are probably lots of ways of characterising these Prizes. I mention three:

- First, they span all of Further and Higher Education.
- Second, they are awarded for activities which have made a difference, for people and the planet.
- Third, this “making a difference” is interpreted in the broadest way, not only in terms of quality of research, or economic impact, or advances in healthcare, or contributions to social well-being. The Prizes recognise excellence and achievement across all such activities, and more.

So the great celebration which we all share in tonight is the diversity of FE and HE in the UK, and the many measures of your value to society.

For all the sentiments of the day to this effect, the UK is not always very good at celebrating this kind of diversity. In higher education, we are periodically obsessed by the Research Assessment Exercise, which has had an almost exclusive emphasis on the academic quality of research. And the jury will be out for some time on whether the emerging Research Excellence Framework will do any better in this regard.

Over recent years, newspaper league tables, for all that we might criticise them, have strived to bring wider measures of excellence. But despite these efforts, their outcomes generally remain more strongly correlated with the RAE than anything else.

A comparison with the USA may be salutary. We are all conditioned to the excellence of the Ivy League for example, but arguably, in the UK we have nothing akin to the smaller, largely undergraduate Liberal Arts Colleges. These are extraordinarily successful in their focus on undergraduate education, producing a stream of students who are highly sought after as employees and graduate students at research intensive universities. Interestingly, most – perhaps all – of the Liberal Arts Colleges are much smaller than a UK university, so it is

fallacious to think that scale is necessarily a factor in excellence. Of course I am not suggesting that we copy all aspects of the US educational system!!

To my mind, there are a couple of essential ingredients which are necessary for this kind of diversity.

One is that our institutions are autonomous. We have Governing Bodies which are independent of the state and have the authority and indeed the responsibility to shape the institution's future. There are all kinds of Governance issues here, and I would simply say that I don't believe that the standard corporate model of the Board is the only possibly model for a successful educational institution: there are probably many structures in which it is possible to represent the interests of stakeholders in an organisation, and not just the interests of "us inmates"! Unfortunately (perhaps fortunately!), time does not permit an in-depth analysis of Governance in Oxbridge Colleges...

The second essential ingredient is funding, by which I mean not just adequate funding, but diversity of funding. Here our Funding Councils are in an extremely difficult position; I doubt that it is possible to design a funding model which stimulates and rewards the diversity of FE and HE which society needs. Only slightly tongue in cheek, I would say that every institution can help the Funding Councils by diversifying income streams wherever possible, and thereby lessening our dependence on these bodies, increasing our ability to act independently, and through this expanding our collective diversity. Latterly as a Vice-Chancellor, I felt that this was actually the meaning of the word "freedom"...

I finish with two comments. First, for me the essential diversity of FE and HE means that essays attempting to answer questions such as 'What are universities for' are, in this day and age, largely futile: they are 'for' everything from stimulating and fulfilling human curiosity to meeting the needs of society and the future sustainability of the planet. Second, within FE and HE we ourselves feel the pressures to be successful under the traditional public measures, such as the RAE. So my final message is one which is obvious but doesn't always happen: as an institution, be comfortable with your own strengths, and take pride in doing well what you are best at.

I hope it is now clear why I believe that we should value so much the Queen's Anniversary Prizes and the work of the Royal Anniversary Trust. The scope – and it is exemplified by the Prize Winners tonight – is the most wonderful celebration of diversity of excellence in FE and HE. I applaud the Prizes committee for their work, congratulate you all on your success, and offer you best wishes for building on that success in the future.

Thank you.

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