

A New Era of Higher Education Executive View

Higher Education is evolving at an extraordinary pace. Industry-wide disruption and accelerated digital transformation present a unique opportunity as leaders look to create a future changed by the pandemic.

In this issue, Boyden's Karen Daly-Gherabi explores what higher education looks like in the new reality with Professor Richard Davies, Pro-Vice-Chancellor Global, Newcastle University.

Daly-Gherabi: Higher Ed has an opportunity to emerge stronger. How can leaders leverage this time of disruption and change? **Davies:** Uncertainty will trouble universities for years to come because of the pandemic but we will emerge stronger and our role in society has never been clearer. We now have an opportunity to further rethink and reinforce the role of universities as civic organisations that strive to tackle contemporary societal challenges and ensure this long-term direction does not change despite the headwinds. University global strategies are as important as ever.

One year on from the first lockdown we are still troubled by the uncertainty of whether international students will be able to travel to the UK for next academic year starting September 2021 and what hoops we may all need to jump through for them to be here 'present in person'. This time last year universities started to turn their hand to chartering airlines to bring them here. This year vaccinations for incoming international students would be a fantastic step forwards. International students are the lifeblood of an international university so finding a way past this is essential.

And whilst they are with us we will need to do everything we can to strengthen the experience for international students – particularly the ones that cannot make it here. The question of how one provides an international experience when one of the most powerful elements – the place itself – is not on offer is a gargantuan challenge for universities around the world.



Professor Richard Davies
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Global,
Newcastle University

Professor Richard Davies is responsible for the international presence and impact of the university, international student recruitment, world rankings, the entry of international students into the university and a range of university-wide activities locally, nationally and internationally. Link to bio [here](#).

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Daly-Gherabi: What does this mean in the short-term? Davies: One key area of the student experience is international experiential opportunities. We adapted quickly to the challenge, bringing students back from their overseas exchange during the first Covid wave and at Newcastle University we have now opened up as many international virtual opportunities as we possibly can with universities around the world. This provides an international opportunity for a wider cross-section of our students as it costs nothing – Covid, horrendous as it has been – is also an equaliser.

But Covid has not been the only challenge facing university leadership. Coming out of Europe had a couple of surprises. Europe has been hugely important for our research. Funding has been substantial and the UK did very well, winning more funding than we put in and we gained significant prestige. Until Dec 24, 2020, we expected to not be part of European research – but we are. Unfortunately many in the sector have witnessed a steady year-on-year decline in research grant wins since 2016. We simply submitted less. So we need to see a 'V' shaped recovery. Building awareness and supporting colleagues will be imperative – as quickly as we can.

And for our students who want and need to study abroad - we are working through the trilemma of the end of Erasmus, the start of a new Turing scheme and the pandemic. My international experiences as a student changed the direction my career went in and students and colleagues tell the same story – so we will go for Turing.

Daly-Gherabi: What do you see as a top lesson? Davies: Covid has been a big equaliser. Internationalisation can now be for all. It does not depend on your ability to leave home and travel which has been a block for some. The pomp and ceremony of international interaction has been replaced by the interruption of cats, children and the delivery driver on a zoom call. Let's try and cement informality in for the future, with less burning of carbon.

The buffeting has been intense. Our role has been to be really clear about the long-term values, goals and aspirations and ensure we're appropriately set up to come back as stronger universities, even clearer about our civic role. Covid has shown what we knew all along - that we do have a critically important role to play in positive change and tackling global challenges.



A New Era of Higher Education: Executive View shares insights from higher education leaders across the globe. Find more expert opinion from Boyden's Education Practice leaders [here](#).