

## **Feature**

# **In Conversation with: Professor Steve Larkin and Professor Mantz Yorke**

**Karen Nelson, John Clarke and Sally Kift**

*Editors Karen Nelson, John Clarke and Sally Kift interview Professor Steve Larkin, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Leadership, Charles Darwin University, Australia and Professor Mantz Yorke, Visiting Professor in the Department of Educational Research, Lancaster University, England. Steve and Mantz were the keynote speakers at the 14<sup>th</sup> Pacific Rim First Year in Higher Education Conference held in Fremantle from 29 June to 1 July, 2011.<sup>1</sup> They joined the Journal Editors at the conclusion of the main conference program to explore some of the key themes raised in their addresses. This feature interview presents a summary of that conversation.*

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<sup>1</sup> The keynote addresses available at [http://www.fyhe.com.au/past\\_papers/papers11/FYHE-2011/content/html/keynote.html](http://www.fyhe.com.au/past_papers/papers11/FYHE-2011/content/html/keynote.html) will provide context and background to this conversation.

## **Biographies**

### *Professor Steve Larkin*

**Steve Larkin** is a Kungarakany man from Darwin in the Northern Territory (NT). Prior to 1995, Steve worked in urban, rural and remote Aboriginal communities in health and community development programs while working with the NT Government. In 1995 Steve was appointed by the Australian Medical Association (AMA) as their National Aboriginal Health Adviser. In 1997 Steve became the inaugural Chief Executive Officer for the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation (NACCHO). In 1999, Steve joined the Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care as an Assistant Secretary in the Office for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health (OATSIH) where he managed the Social Health (including implementing and managing the Bringing Them Home program), Substance Misuse, Men's and Prison's health, Executive Policy as well as the Research and Data programs.

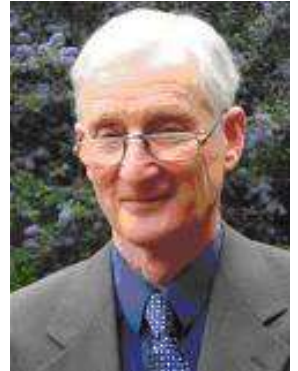


In 2002 Steve managed the National Indigenous Employment program for a brief period before transferring to the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies as Deputy Principal. In 2004, Steve was appointed as Principal (CEO) of the Institute. In 2009 Steve took up his current position of Pro Vice-Chancellor - Indigenous Leadership with Charles Darwin University.

He is currently Chair of the Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council (IHEAC), a member of the Board of Beyond Blue, a member of the Child Deaths Review Committee (NT), a member of the Indigenous Road Injury Project Advisory Committee and is the incoming Chair for the Expert Reference Group for the Sexual Assault Referral Centre Mobile Outreach Service in the NT. In 2008, Steve was inducted into the National Indigenous Sports Hall of Fame for his contribution to field hockey.

## *Professor Mantz Yorke*

**Mantz Yorke's** early career was in teaching and teacher education, after which he turned to staff development and educational research at Manchester Polytechnic. He then spent six years as a senior manager at Liverpool Polytechnic followed by two years on secondment as Director of Quality Enhancement at the Higher Education Quality Council.



Mantz returned to his institution in 1994, continuing as Professor of Higher Education. Following retirement in 2005, he is now Visiting Professor in the Department of Educational Research, at Lancaster University.

He has worked on various projects related to graduate employability, the most significant of which involved membership of the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team [ESECT] whose activities spanned higher education in England (and spread further afield). This work led to his general editorship of the Learning and Employability series of publications produced by the Higher Education Academy (HEA) in the United Kingdom.

In addition to working on employability, he has researched, presented and published on various aspects of higher education, including the first year experience, retention and assessment.

## Focusing on the Widening Participation agenda

**Steve Larkin:** The Australian higher education system reforms are positioning equity groups as major targets in compact agreements and having performance funding tied to the achievement of those targets certainly puts those groups in a potentially good position. As you know, there are four equity groups—regional and remote, non-English speaking, Indigenous and low socio-economic status.

I think we know enough about the social economic statistical data to know where indigenous people are positioned within society at the moment. The health, education and income data shows that they are coming from a relatively low socio-economic base.

Universities have to nominate two of the equity groups as their core ones. What I'm hearing is that only 50% or so of universities have nominated Indigenous in the first round. This decision seems to be tied to the demographic make-up in their catchment area. As one Vice-chancellor said to me, "I have a larger population of non-English speaking and low socio-economic status students (than Indigenous), so I'm going to nominate those two groups because I've got the better potential to achieve there."

**Mantz Yorke:** In England (Scotland is different) the effect that all of the reductions in funding will have on widening participation are likely to be

quite severe. So I think we're actually likely to reverse the widening participation trend. That said, when we started introducing fees I thought that might happen because of the differences in perception of debt polarising the relatively well off who see debt as an investment for the future, and the relatively poorly off who see bailiffs knocking on the door.

But it seems it didn't, so I could be wrong. But I can't see us doing very well in higher education (in England) until a lot of the dust has settled and I think it will take a few years for that to happen.

**In England, the effect of reductions in funding ... on widening participation will be quite severe (Mantz Yorke)**

**Steve Larkin:** One of the things I've been thinking about and discussing with IHEAC<sup>2</sup> is the Treaty of Waitangi in New Zealand. The Treaty formally constructs a relationship dynamic between the Vice-Chancellor and the senior Maori academic. It's not a "nice to have," it's a "must have." Under the Treaty, Vice-Chancellors *have* to negotiate with the senior Maori academic to agree on how they're going to go forward in a given year. Such an arrangement is not possible here (Australia) but I wondered how you could capture that relationship dynamic in Australia without having a treaty to take it forward.

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<sup>2</sup> Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council.

I think First Nation status needs to be sought and we need to be using that kind of language. I commented before about the compacts and the four equity groups and universities

having to pick two. We don't see ourselves as an equity group—the reality is that

we intersect all those groups: we are regional, remote, English is not a first language for a lot of our people up north, and we're certainly low SES. Something IHEAC is looking at seriously at the moment in the context of the Review<sup>3</sup> is that, by attaining First Nation status, it takes us out of the equity grouping. I think the Commonwealth Government has to show some leadership here with the Vice-Chancellors.

**We don't see ourselves as an equity group!**  
(Steve Larkin)

there was obviously the same kind of problem. I said to the staff at the time, "Isn't there a way where you can actually work on what they know and what they

understand and the way they understand things and bring that to the curriculum rather than apply your curriculum to them?" That's putting it very crudely but it was trying to honour what they bring because there are a lot of things that

different cultural groups have to offer but when you've got privileged group, it's much less likely that they will be picked up.

I think there are issues about staff development in terms of being able to cope with the expectations and the understanding of that because many staff would not understand – I wouldn't. I'm a traditional white person. I don't have access in the same way that others would do so I think there's a real difficulty. In a way, Steve put his finger on it when he was talking about the numbers of people: Where are the role models? Where are the people who can deal with this from an understanding point of view, who can understand all the cultural ambience that goes on?

## About inclusive pedagogy

**Mantz Yorke:** I was very taken by what Steve said [in his keynote address]. He was talking about different [competing] epistemologies and I wondered about that from the UK context, thinking about immigrant groups in inner London. I did a workshop at one of the universities where there was a fair body of Somali people and

**Bring what they know to the curriculum rather than apply your curriculum to them**  
(Mantz Yorke)

**Steve Larkin:** A UK academic who came from Coventry ran a workshop for us. And she gave an example about how to provide inspiration for others in this context. There was a beach where

shellfish get washed up in their thousands. And this fellow was walking behind this other bloke who every 10 metres would pick up a shellfish—and there were thousands of them—and throw it back into

<sup>3</sup> Reference to the *Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People*. <http://www.deewr.gov.au/Indigenous/HigherEducation/PolicyGuidelines/Pages/ReviewHigherEdAccessOutcome.aspx>

the water. Another 10 metres he'd do the same thing. Eventually, the person following said "What are you doing that for? You're only throwing one in? What difference is that going to make?" And the bloke said "Well, one makes a difference." And it just seems to me that's part of what we need to be thinking about when people say "I don't know what to do," all of us need to pick up the shellfish and throw it back.

Everyone's got a part to play because otherwise they're complicit in maintaining that system that is not inclusive. I think where people get confused is around notions of responsibility; we're probably socialised to think and understand responsibility in an individual way. You know: "You did it. We saw you." "Yes, I own up." When it's a collective problem, people are still using the same paradigm and say, "I didn't create that. I wasn't around then." I think we need to think about how that works when there is a collective responsibility. That's my point. A part of the problem related to the epistemology is because it's also related to axiology and ontology: How do I understand the world? How big a value do I put in what I'm seeing? That's what I know.

Part of what I've also argued is that there's a racial epistemology of ignorance. I mean, people get to know some things and they don't get to know others. Sometimes it's a result of how people are socialised or the decisions they're making.

**One makes a difference  
(Steve Larkin)**

I think what we are looking for is just good professional practice. If you take the word "Indigenous" off "Indigenous student support," what do you get? "Student support" and where does the responsibility for that fall?

I say that it's part of everybody's professional responsibility. It's really good that non-Indigenous people are sensitive to protocols but there's a more practical imperative here and that is we need to get Indigenous students through. We must get them in to uni and we need to make sure that they're supported to such an extent that they complete. People won't be offended if all you're doing is increasing the number of Indigenous students you're going to get through.

You just have to persist.

I'd agree with Victor Hart, who said "you can't undo 200 years of injustice in a short number of years." Just because I'm a PVC doesn't mean I've got carte blanche over the university I'm working in. Sometimes

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you don't get up. My philosophy is to "do a Gandhi" and be a pebble in the shoe. And if I don't get it this time,

I'm going to keep going until they take me out of their shoe! It's just, you know, persistent endeavour.

## Is inclusive pedagogy just good practice?

**Mantz Yorke:** I don't know what the answer is because you could say if you privilege good pedagogical teaching you may be privileging just the thing you want not to have happen. It may well be that things need to be hand in hand rather than separate in the evolution, rather like altering the ship as you sail along. There's good teaching practice all round the place and I've seen it here at this conference. But actually there are other things that need to be grafted in and the "rotten wood"—the bits that don't work—taken out and a better plank put in its place. But if you say "This is good teaching," the risk is that you will get a fixed model of what good teaching, learning and assessment is and that becomes normative and prescriptive. And then it becomes much more difficult to change it once it's ossified in that kind of way.

I think really if you're going to go for inclusivity, you need to be thinking about: Does this work in an inclusivity context? I think the issue is: Does the pedagogy respond to the complexity of the demographic? And responding adequately implies diversity of response and this is where you tend to perhaps worry where you have tightly specified learning outcomes which may well constrain and straitjacket. I think we need to be much looser about objectives and learning outcomes and be more judgmental—not in a kind of prescriptively judgmental sense—

**But if you say 'This is good teaching,' the risk is that you will get a fixed model of what good teaching, learning and assessment is (Mantz Yorke)**

but judging if the person has responded adequately or not to the task set according to where they're coming from.

So you've got to be responsive to what the students produce and you've got to answer the question: Is this response to the task we've set an adequate one? But that requires you to be open to various ways of responding. The judgmental model of assessment seems to me to have something going for it there and I think you can actually apply it in socio-cultural contexts. It seems to me that that's the way forward.

## And finally ...

**Mantz Yorke:** I was just wondering on the extent to which good practice in this area is actually brought together, and I don't know about Australia because I'm a foreigner basically, but it struck me that there are lots of things going on that could be really consolidated so that those people who work in this area can (a) get together and change practice, and (b) affirm each other and so on. And so the dynamic is strengthened by having people outside their university because it can sometimes be a pretty lonely furrow to plough in this area. But if you've got others you can ring up, email to, whatever it is to get ideas and support, then surely that's a strength and worth aiming for. I mean it ties in with the

**A group like this has tremendous networking possibilities (Mantz Yorke)**

suggestion I made in the workshop I led, that a group like this (FYHE) has tremendous networking possibilities. The expertise is so scattered you need to bring people together in various ways; it needn't necessarily be physically together but in some way they can be brought together so all the developments are actually supported and there is strength in that and it's not one person fighting another in battle.

**Steve Larkin:** Quite often, I'm in the position where if I don't say it no one else will. I'm not being a martyr. I'm just saying that I long for the day when someone else will say it. I'm waiting for the day when one of my non-Indigenous colleagues will feel just as strongly. Actually, they do feel strongly but out of respect they just feel that I should say it. Maybe I have to say to them, "Look, you say it."

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