

**Speech by Mr Richard Lewis, President INQAAHE
at the opening of the workshop in Muscat, Oman – 22 March, 2004**

It is a great privilege and pleasure to be here.

The strength and warmth of the invitation delivered by HE Dr Rawya last year to INQAAHE has been matched by the welcome we have received.

We are grateful for the excellent work of the local organizing committee.

Oman is a wonderful place to visit. A culture which exhibits great vitality - look at what has been achieved in the last few decades- combined with strongly held tradition. We have much to learn from the experience of Oman.

This is a very appropriate time to visit Oman. As Dr Al Haj informed us there are many important developments in Quality Assurance in Higher Education both in Oman and in the Gulf region.

We are also glad to be here to join in the celebrations offered to HE Dr Rewya on her appointment to the cabinet. It would be presumptuous of me to offer advice to the Omani cabinet but they would be well advised to follow the INQAAHE experience and accept Dr Reya's proposals with great enthusiasm.

The third reason is that this is an important stage in the development of the INQAAHE Network. Established in 1991, INQAAHE is a young teenager and sometimes acts as such. When established there were, outside the USA (which has a long tradition of Quality Assurance in Higher Education), only about ten countries with national Quality Assurance systems. The Network now has over 100 members drawn from 55 countries.

This growth in size and activity – combined with the increased regional based focus of quality assurance – means that INQAAHE must periodically review the way in which it operates. The discussions that we are to hold in Oman will be an important part of the history of INQAAHE.

This is not a conference with many expert speakers with academic papers. It is a workshop, with the emphasis on work. It is an occasion that brings together the leaders of national Quality Assurance bodies to discuss how the Quality Assurance movement can best contribute to the enhancement of Higher Education both in our own countries but also internationally.

The growth of Higher Education (and the consequent need for Quality Assurance) is often argued to be due to economic reasons; including the need for a well qualified labour force. While this is indeed very important I believe that there is an even more important reason for the importance of Higher Education. We live in a world of diverse cultures, this is to be welcomed and encouraged. INQAAHE aims to recognise such diversity and would not wish to impose one approach to Quality Assurance on the whole world. But, sadly alongside diversity is sometimes found prejudice and intolerance. One of the most important weapons in the fight against these evils is "disinterested scholarship". Higher Education has a very important role to play in the protection of "disinterested scholarship" – we must do our best to help Higher Education prosper and especially assist the advance this important objective.

I emphasized the need for work. But this is also an opportunity to build further the network of international QA leaders. This means that we should spend time in meeting new friends and colleagues and exchanging views and opinions. I hope that you will find this to be a pleasant experience.

So as well as my exhortation to work, I shall also add the message "enjoy"