# Maruja Gutierrez Diaz

Maruja Gutierrez-Diaz is the Head of Unit for Innovation and Creativity at Education & Culture Directorate-General, European Commission, Belgium. She has degrees in architecture and in urban planning from the School of Architecture, Polytechnical University, Madrid (1971). She was a Postgtraduate Researcher at the Planning Research Unit, University of Edinburgh; specialist in computer-aided planning techniques. After some years as Consultant, Head of the Centre for Information and Documentation of the Madrid Metropolitan Area, (extended since 1983 to the Madrid Region), in charge of both technical and citizen oriented information systems, she joined the European Commission in 1988, as specialist in introduction and promotion of new technologies. First, as Deputy Head of the Central Library, in charge of its modernisation and networking and since 1995, as Head of the Publications Unit, member of the Europa server launching team and of its interinstitutional editorial board. In October 1999, she became Head of the new unit for Multimedia – Culture, Education, Training, in charge of the eLearning initiative, prior to her current post.

## In your view, what is the most probable or desirable future scenario regarding new technologies in higher education?

The most desirable scenario would be that higher education spearheads the use of new technologies to build a true lifelong learning environement. In a first stage, this would benefit mainly HE actors, but then effects would spill onto other education levels, and in the longer run it would grow into a lifelong learning infrastructure.  It might also lever an extension of universities' role as knowledge agents in society and open a wide range of new HE services.

The most probable, according to current trends, is that the increasing use of new technologies makes a mark in access to learning resources, general "delivery" of HE and international cooperation, but without a true transformation of HE.

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

Focusing fiercely on quality. Why? Because the core mission of universities is creating knowledge, and this hinges first and foremost on quality. This entails re-thinking HE quality in the broadest sense of the term, including objectives, means, and results. For example, the trend to an output oriented system does not take away the need to ensure high quality inputs in the form of lecturers, tutors, or libraries (which will increasingly be digital ones).

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

1. Focusing on quality while ensuring "massification". If the XIXth century meant quasi-universal primary schooling and the XXthe century quasi-universal secondary education, the XXIst century might mean quasi-universal HE

2. Fostering a critical attitude and a sense of initiative while ensuring the wide knowledge base required for practically any discipline.

3. Building an ethos of hard work and demanding personal realisation goals while developing a closer connection with society.

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

The new digital era is a new frontier. The worst possible way would be to ignore it, keeping to further development of existing models. It is not a matter of technology, it is a cultural change as deep and pervasive as printing or the steam engine. A new civilisation is in the make, and HE has a key role in it.

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

It is easy to recommend courage and imagination, but it is hard to see how to best act. In the first place, there needs to be a deep and shared awareness of the challenges at hand, in HE itself, but also in political and business decision making spheres. The knowledge society is not a slogan, it is a new frontier. It is also a new source of energy. A social will to build it, and to build on it, is the best possible way ahead.

One remarkable characteristic of current times is is the speed with which innovations emerge, propagate and are adopted. From air travel to GSM, not to mention internet or health services, daily life has experienced sea changes in a very short period of time. User expectations have become increasingly complex and demanding with the same speed. This implies a much closer contact of technical and scientific progress with end users; of research with applied research with innovation, ie with societal adoption.

IT based changes have proven once and again unexpected, some would say uncontrollable. The education sector has been particularly reluctant to taking them on. There is a repeated historical phenomenon of academia becoming entrenched in existing cultural patterns and values to the point of refusing new horizons. HE is immersed in a world wide process of scientific, economic, social and cultural change and needs to  perform a conscious adaptation to it. Ignoring what is happening, losing synch with culture is the main risk.