The Purpose of the University

Presidential Address

by

F. Cyril James

at the opening session of the
Fourth General Conference of
the International Association
of Universities, Tokyo, Tuesday
August 31, 1965.

Universities in Europe came to birth nearly a thousand years ago. If we trace the origins of our academic institutions still further back - to the great Islamic universities, the academies of classical Greece and the ancient Buddhist foundations in Asia - their history lengthens to twenty-five centuries.

That is a long period, almost half the history of civilisation on this planet, but I venture to suggest that never before has there assembled in one place so oecumenical a group of university men and women. Every continent is represented, every race, every religion and every major academic discipline. We are met to renew old friendships and to make new friends. We have come together to exchange ideas and to find solutions to our own problems from the experience of others. Most important of all, we demonstrate by this meeting that universities in all parts of the world share a common heritage and recognize a common purpose, to which the three major themes of this Conference are related.

Let me address myself to that common purpose, in the attempt to offer a framework for our discussions during the sessions that are to follow. I do so humbly before my peers in this audience. Many able men, from Plato and Ibn Kaldun to Cardinal Newman and President Clark Kerr, have tried to formulate the ideal of the perfect university - and there are sharp contrasts among the patterns they have formulated. All of you are familiar with the vast body of literature on the subject: most of you have formulated your own working hypothesis.

Turning aside from questions of finance to more academic considerations, what are the implications of the hypothesis that the purpose of the university is to promote the development of society to the highest attainable level? Let us look briefly at these implications in regard to each of the three traditional functions of teaching, research and the perennial re-interpretation of our heritage of knowledge and culture.

In terms of teaching

In terms of teaching, which is the oldest function of the university and even today the most important, the first implication of our definition of the university's purpose is that it should admit only those students who are likely to complete the course satisfactorily and so to qualify themselves to play an appropriate part in the life of the community. In view of the steadily rising demands in all countries of the world for access to higher education, and of the steadily rising cost of educating each student, it is clear that there is no place in the university for young men and women who lack the ability or the strength of character to complete the course of study on which they are embarked - no matter how much their parents may be willing to spend in order to give them four or five years in the social environment of a pleasant university campus. In view of the urgent need of the community for larger numbers of highly trained men and women, it is equally clear that no young man or woman who has the ability and character to benefit from study at the university should be deprived of that opportunity by reason of his family finances, his religion, his social class or the colour of his skin.

This question of access to higher education is the second of the major themes before us for discussion and, once again, we have the advantage of working papers based on research carried out during the past five years. I shall not attempt to pre-judge the discussion during the sessions ahead of us, but it is clear that every university in the world must face this challenge squarely and re-examine its admission procedures.

When that has been done, the next task of the university, in terms of our definition of its purpose, is to ensure that the programme of studies that it offers to its students is challenging - that it will develop both the mind and the character of the individual. The university must strive for excellence and not allow itself to fall into easy contentment and mediocrity. The young men and women whom it is educating are destined to become, in modern parlance, high-level manpower - key members of the community on whom the rate of its development largely depends. Courses that are purely repetitive, the kind of course where the notes of the professor are transmuted into the notes of the student without passing through the mind of either, have no place in a university.

To attain excellence of this kind, a university must have outstanding teachers, and the supply of outstanding teachers today is much smaller than the demand for them. It is easier to construct buildings than to recruit staff and even when a good junior member has been appointed to the staff of a university it happens too often that his prospects of future promotion depend on his research publications rather than on his ability to teach effectively. (1) Research is important. It is referred to at length in later paragraphs but, unless universities in all parts of the world place greater emphasis on teaching ability when considering appointments and promotions there is little chance that the educational programme will be challenging enough to attain excellence. Technological devices can increase the range of influence of a good teacher: they cannot replace him.

There is, however, another way in which universities sometimes defeat their own desire to attain excellence, the cases where existing programmes are starved of men and equipment in order to set up a new professional or postgraduate programme that seems to offer immediate prestige. Each university must decide what it can do well within the limits of the resources available to it, and concentrate its energies in those fields. Even the wealthiest institutions that the rest of us envy - Moscow or Harvard for example - would be the first to admit that they cannot do all that they might like to undertake.

One aspect of this utilisation of resources, which is emphasized in the results of the South East Asia study, is more controversial. The most urgent needs of the community in regard to particular types of highly trained manpower differ greatly from one country to another, and even in a single country they change with each stage of the development process. (2) Each university faces a unique challenge if it is to promote the development of its particular community, and the form of this challenge tends to change from generation to generation.

---

(1) Cf. The Flight from Teaching, Carnegie Corporation, New York, 1964.

(2) Cf. F. Harbison and C.A. Myers: Education, Manpower and Economic Growth, New York, 1964.

To attain excellence of this kind, a university must have outstanding teachers, and the supply of outstanding teachers today is much smaller than the demand for them. It is easier to construct buildings than to recruit staff and even when a good junior member has been appointed to the staff of a university it happens too often that his prospects of future promotion depend on his research publications rather than on his ability to teach effectively. (1) Research is important. It is referred to at length in later paragraphs but, unless universities in all parts of the world place greater emphasis on teaching ability when considering appointments and promotions there is little chance that the educational programme will be challenging enough to attain excellence. Technological devices can increase the range of influence of a good teacher: they cannot replace him.

There is, however, another way in which universities sometimes defeat their own desire to attain excellence, the cases where existing programmes are starved of men and equipment in order to set up a new professional or postgraduate programme that seems to offer immediate prestige. Each university must decide what it can do well within the limits of the resources available to it, and concentrate its energies in those fields. Even the wealthiest institutions that the rest of us envy - Moscow or Harvard for example - would be the first to admit that they cannot do all that they might like to undertake.

One aspect of this utilisation of resources, which is emphasized in the results of the South East Asia study, is more controversial. The most urgent needs of the community in regard to particular types of highly trained manpower differ greatly from one country to another, and even in a single country they change with each stage of the development process. (2) Each university faces a unique challenge if it is to promote the development of its particular community, and the form of this challenge tends to change from generation to generation.

---

(1) Cf. The Flight from Teaching, Carnegie Corporation, New York, 1964.

(2) Cf. F. Harbison and C.A. Myers: Education, Manpower and Economic Growth, New York, 1964.

Since resources are limited, and no university can do well all the things that it would like to do, it follows that each university must consider the special needs of its community when formulating its teaching programme. Agricultural scientists may be more urgently needed than nuclear physicists; school teachers than lawyers. Even though each university must, as is emphasized below, enjoy that degree of autonomy that will enable it to work out its own teaching programmes, it will fail in its purpose - and disappoint its own graduates, - if in formulating these programmes it fails to take into account the vital needs of its community.

In terms of research

When we turn to the second traditional function of the university - the encouragement of research to expand the frontiers of human knowledge - it must be kept in mind (as has already been pointed out) that emphasis on research must not be allowed to impair thequality of teaching or to create in the minds of the younger members of the staff the idea that good teaching is less important than research. The balance between the two functions is delicate: each type of activity can enrich the other and both are important to the development of the community. This is a problem that confronts each university in the world at every stage of the development of the community it serves. There is no standard formula.

It must be remembered, too, that the problem involves not only the overall expenditure of resources on all types of research. It is significantly affected by the kind of research that is carried on and - since most research is nowadays financed by grants from governments or foundations rather than from the university budget - it is important that some individual or committee in each university should keep under constant appraisal theentire pattern of the research programme. Outside funds for research are more readily available in some fields than in others - one thinks of cancer research, nuclear physics and electronic engineering at this moment in our history. Large grants for research in highly specialised fields, obtained by enthusiastic professors, can distort the whole pattern of a university and, since total salaries in departments with large research grants are often higher than salaries in other parts of the university, undermine the morale and esprit-de-corps of the teaching staff.

Our definition of the purpose of the university implies, moreover, that in formulating its research programme the university must take account of the urgent needs of the community as well as of the personal interests of its professors. This problem, like so many others, grows more difficult when funds are scarce. If there is not enough money for both, it is clearly unwise to develop expensive laboratories for the study of neurology or astro-physics when the most urgent need of the community is for greater knowledge of plant genetics and soil chemistry to augment its agricultural

production, and of pediatrics to protect the health of its children. Research in such fields as linguistics, pedagogy and sociology may have greater significance for many countries at this moment in history than research in jurisprudence or philosophy.

In terms of the conservation and dissemination of culture

In terms of the university's responsibility for the conservation, and the interpretation anew to each succeeding generation, of the community's heritage of knowledge and culture we must at all times remember that development is not simply an economic process: it has cultural and political ingredients. Economic, cultural and political progress interact on one another to create the problems of today, and to shape the pattern of tomorrow.

The task of the university is not solely to train scientists, technologists and individuals competent to enter the various learned professions. The university must educate young men and women to become good citizens, deeply imbued with the cultural heritage of the community and possessing a sensitive appreciation of the culture of other communities. Over and above this, the university must teach its students to face new problems thoughtfully and objectively, with the desire to find constructive solutions.

This is not the place to enter on a long argument regarding the virtues of general education as against specialised education in a narrow field. There are wide differences among the universities of the world in this regard, and they are related in some measure to the quality of the education that incoming students have received in the local schools and colleges. What is important for us is that all university programmes should endeavour to orientate the special subject-matter to the general life of the community, a result that is achieved by good teaching rather than by detailed changes in the syllabus of a course.

It is important, too, in this regard to recall the ancient function of the university as the conscience of the nation. It cannot afford to compromise with its own ideals but must set an example to its students (and to the community that it serves) of integrity, of thoughtful effort to find solutions to contemporary problems rather than augment partisan controversy. Not all universities have attained this ideal!

Finally, under this heading, it is apparent at this moment in history that the university must develop a more sensitive international consciousness. The technology of transportation and communication is rapidly shrinking the size of the world in terms of personal human contacts: the increasing number of sovereign states (and of languages that were not heretofore used in higher education) has made these personal contacts more difficult. This is perhaps the most

urgent problem that confronts our generation. Upon its solution dependsthe alternative between the peaceful progress of mankind and an atomic war of annihilation and I am happy that the Director-General of Unesco has so eloquently underlined the international responsibilities of the university in his address this morning.

Autonomy and co-operation

The duty of the university to promote the development of the community that it serves is no easy task. It ranges far beyond economics into cultural, political, moral and social fields - and I find that, even in this brief statement, I have often referred to a delicate balance of conflicting claims.

There is an antithesis in the very nature of the university. It must serve the needs of its community at each stage of that community's development but it must be free to make its own appraisal of those needs and to decide how it can best render service. Each university, in every part of the world, must have that autonomy which will enable it to decide for itself who it can usefully teach, what subjects it can teach effectively and who will do the teaching.

The autonomy of universities is the third subject for discussion at this Conference and, in this case, the working paper is not so much the product of research as a dialogue between the late Sir Hector Hetherington and the members of your Administrative Board. That is appropriate. Autonomy is not something to be measured statistically and expressed in formulae. It is a matter of personal judgement and wisdom, operating within the wide diversity of legal and constitutional patterns throughout the world.

It is also a subject that needs to be studied and reinterpreted at each stage of the development of the community. No university in the world today enjoys the kind of autonomy that characterised Paris in the thirteenth century. Many universities, especially in countries with Anglo-Saxon traditions, are worried that they may not be able to preserve the patterns of autonomy that characterised the nineteenth century.

Let me suggest, in conclusion, one direction in which universities might, in the interest of preserving autonomy, consciously modify important aspects of its present pattern. It seems to me - and this audience should be especially sensitive to the idea - that universities must in the future co-operate to a much greater degree than they have in the past. It is not possible for every university to attain excellence in every field of knowledge, and in some fields of science and technology the cost of the apparatus and instrumentation now required for research is beyond the resources of any single university anywhere in the world. Universities must work out methods of co-operation in each region of a country in order to offer to students

the best possible educational programme: they must co-operate in a national pattern in regard to major fields of research; they must co-operate internationally not only to aid the development of new countries but to enlarge their own intellectual resources. The experience of the International Geophysical Year has given us a glimpse - in the specialised field of the physical sciences - of what wholehearted co-operation can achieve. Problems of hunger, of education, of disease and of political stability are just as important.

The antithesis between complete independence and co-operative effort - like that between autonomy and service to the community - is inherent in the concept of the university. It is the task of our generation to find a new synthesis, in each country of the world and across international frontiers. I hope that this Conference may enable us to move forward steadily toward that goal.