

3. The Role of Universities: *Asavia Wandira*

Although higher education is generally taken to mean all post-secondary education including universities, teacher training institutions and institutes of applied sciences and research, the special role of universities in the development of human resources merits separate mention. Universities occupy a pivotal status in the hierarchy of educational institutions and they exercise considerable influence on the work of other institutions. Furthermore, modern universities claim a significant proportion of the education budgets of their countries and are likely to continue to do so as the pressure for their expansion increases. It is obviously necessary that some concern should be shown for returns to investment in universities, especially as the general impression that universities tend towards isolationism and élitism has led to much criticism of their role in society. In answer to such criticism, it is not enough to explain the role of universities in terms of their history and origin: their present character, operation and relevance to contemporary society must also be examined.

The Multiple Roles of Universities in Human Resource Development

Although the intensification of the drive towards innovation in universities is of recent origin, universities have over the ages demonstrated a capacity to adapt themselves to the dominant notions of their responsibilities to society. One of the oldest of such notions is that which regards universities as instruments of civilisation created to produce civilised, educated, or cultured man. At the heart of the traditional university is the commitment to transmit a culture which makes man not only civilised but universal. At national level, the extension of university coverage therefore means the extension of culture itself and the increase of educated and civilised men in society. At international level, the extension means the greater universalisation of man across geographical and other barriers. For ultimately the imparting of university education consists in the spread of time-tested ideals no longer subject to national boundaries. Accepting that truth is universal and the fearless teaching of the same is the business of those who discover it, university men join others in equally respectable institutions in defending universalism.

Ashby and others have described how university models born in one region have been transplanted to other regions and, with only minor adaptations, have been made to operate successfully in recipient countries. In such circumstances, it is no surprise that universalism remained at the heart of Commonwealth universities and its proclamation engaged many academics. Nor is it a surprise that Comparative Studies leading to the formulation of general scientific observations have taxed many academic minds.

Significantly, however, in more recent decades, there would appear to have been a gradual retreat by universities into the concerns of their immediate environment and time. The particularism of their contemporary circumstances has come to occupy increasing proportions of their teaching

and research. It may therefore be asked whether the ancient attachment to universalism is any longer relevant and, in particular, whether universalism has anything to do with human resource development as conceived in modern times.

Here, it is pertinent to recall the remarks of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Shridath Ramphal, in a keynote address to the Conference of Vice-Chancellors associated with the London-based Inter-University Council in March 1979 in Jamaica. Mr Ramphal urged the need for international co-operation in an inter-dependent world:

Perhaps it is this insight of the world as a community of people needing each other for survival and having a common interest in the quality of the human condition world-wide that will, more than any other single factor, determine the fate of the dialogue between North and South... in the remaining years of this century. But it will determine much more than that; for international co-operation for development is not a thing apart; it could be human destiny entire.

Mr Ramphal argued that the world had become a "global village", "a single habitation" and then asked: "Is this not perhaps the essential role of the universities; to be in the vanguard of changing the world through changing man's perception of himself in relation to it?"

Clearly aspects of the universalism of the traditional university remain as relevant today as they were in ancient times. It remains the business of the modern universities to assist man in transcending the boundaries of his nation, culture and knowledge itself. In thus assisting village man to look beyond the village, universities can contribute to the creation of a global village.

In regard to the development of the cadre of students upon whom universities spend most of their time and resources, universities strive to achieve "international" standards and labels for graduates which command universal recognition. They thus seek to universalise their graduates. It is through this means that universities in the Commonwealth have created cadres of graduates that can easily be mobilised and transferred from country to country with the minimum of re-training and induction.

Here we may pause to ask one important question. Does the Commonwealth itself regard the existence of such universalised cadres with pride, and are there plans sufficiently developed for the more general utilisation of universalised man in the interests of Commonwealth development as a whole? The phenomenon of the continuing transfer of these cadres of graduates from the poor nations of the Commonwealth, where they are produced at great cost, to the richer and more industrialised nations ought to occupy the minds of government leaders. Equally, the more creative use of these cadres in the interests of Commonwealth-wide human resource development deserves examination.

The question is all the more important because, as has already been emphasised, universities have tended in recent years to retreat into the particularism of their nations. Specifically, development has become an all-consuming task. New elements of development strategy in the 1970s have become the centre of national and international dialogue, and universities are being called on to assist their nations in a multiplicity of new ways. These include the need to provide equality of

opportunity to sections of the community that have remained on the periphery of development such as women and the rural poor; the need to identify alternative sources of energy and to remove bottlenecks to general development; the need for qualitative and quantitative improvements in education and the supply of other basic needs such as health, water, food and housing; the need to ease demographic pressure; and the need to increase the awareness and capacities of nations to tackle environmental problems arising from inadequate development or from the side-effects of the development process itself in such matters as the biological, chemical, social and physical deterioration of the environment.

Clearly, the modern agenda for development is both urgent and compelling. Man is assumed to be at the centre of development, and the development of man himself is seen as the pre-requisite of more general development. Consequently, educational institutions including the university are expected to make the development of man their central concern.

Additionally, universities must determine what, how much, and in what way, they can directly contribute to the elements of development described by new strategies. Given that such strategies are likely to differ from country to country, from region to region, the responses of universities will tend to be governed more by particularism than universalism. Is this a matter for regret and is it a desirable development in the evolution of universities in the Commonwealth?

Constraints to University Innovation and Involvement in Human Resource Development

The implications of involving universities in the nature of contemporary development described above are far reaching and, without proper planning, can become overwhelming. For instance, bringing marginal or peripheral populations within the reach of the university involves dramatic decisions on access, content and methodology. Similarly, the enhancement of the economic utility of university education, and of the university as an institution, demands new decisions on the relationship between university education and work, on the type of research undertaken to support that relationship, on programmes and their content, and on the technology of university education. Additionally, the involvement of the university in basic education, non-formal education and continuing education, leads inevitably to the consideration of new delivery systems in hitherto uncharted areas. Indeed, the very fact of changing the focus of the university from the age-group 18-25 to the adult and working population, and to the mass of unschooled youth of developing countries, presents novel tasks unknown in the history of the university.

In the main, the problems lie less in conceptual changes than in the logistics of change. There are obvious ways in which universities can contribute to development without any drastic change in their structure and approaches. They can, as the Commonwealth Secretary-General has asked them to, champion new perceptions of development. They can also provide consultancy services to agencies involved in human resource development in such matters as design, execution, development and evaluation of programmes. Similarly, universities can reserve for themselves the training of certain cadres of high-level manpower required by development programmes including those for manning other institutions. University research on development needs can be executed in the form of special projects organised outside the normal departmental structures. Other areas of university involvement without serious changes in concept or operation can be explored.

Beyond these possibilities, however, lie decisions as to the appropriateness of existing university structures and provisions for extensive and direct involvement in development work. In particular, the structure of university departments, their programming and crediting systems, the financing and management of universities and, above all, the recruitment, development and use of academic staff in roles hitherto unknown to the university pose new logistical problems.

It would appear that there is much to be gained from Commonwealth joint ventures aimed at encouraging innovation in universities, in exchanging experiences and in describing successful involvement in development tasks. The creation of a common pool of experience in these areas and the spread of knowledge of innovative precedents should themselves contribute towards the generation of momentum for change and the removal of existing constraints. Above all, as the common heritage and assumptions of Commonwealth universities that have served the Commonwealth so well in the past come under pressure of change, the evolution of new structures and modes of operating institutions should command wider interest at international level than at present.

Approaches to Change

At national level, the search for new paths for the ordering of universities is not new. Three time-tested approaches may be briefly examined. They are relying on the forces of the market, using the influence of the political order, and relying on the persuasive influence of the moral order.

Relying upon the market system presumes the readiness of universities to respond to the forces of supply and demand. For instance, if more doctors engineers, teachers or artists are required, this will be reflected in the salaries they fetch on the open market and in the demand for student places in university professional schools. Correspondingly, the demand of those who cannot come into university residence will be met by part-time and non-formal programmes involving distance and personalised learning. Such a free university market will require the minimum of governmental intervention in the allocation and use of university resources. Further, international aid could be attracted to the creation of centres of excellence for meeting international or regional demands.

As is well known, however, free market systems in academic as well as in other fields are difficult to create and they are remarkably unreliable in catering for demands which cannot effectively be expressed, say from the poorer sections of society, or in ensuring response to the demands of social justice. Obviously, moving universities towards wholesale involvement with mass human resource development calls for new relationships between university and society which cannot be guaranteed under a free market system.

One alternative to the market system lies in legitimising the use of the constitutional and persuasive apparatus of the political order. Modern governments already have considerable financial and legislative powers over universities. Through mechanisms for national development planning and resource allocation, they can enforce the greater accountability of the university. If to all this is added the persuasive apparatus of the state, the odds are already heavily weighted in favour of the political order.

The issue then is not one of universities which cannot be brought to book and persuaded to serve society but whether society will provide the necessary resources for the changes and involvement that it demands from university institutions. Universities may be willing to cut their coat according to their cloth, but society on its part must provide enough cloth to cover the expanding body of universities as they respond to the society's demands for development. More often than not the political order demands evidence of results before payment is made. The financing of creative and innovative programmes of universities is often judged by governments and donor agencies in accordance with the traditional criteria of staff/student ratios and cost-benefits, and such calculations often tend to emphasise the *status quo*.

Yet the pleadings of the moral order demanding greater social justice and democracy in education could be urgent. The very legitimacy of a non-conforming university unable to respond to these pleadings could be questioned. Where the university remains impervious to the pleadings of the moral order, and where that order is unable to effect change even by applying sanctions through the political order, there is danger that a university conforming only to the particularism demanded by the political order may still lack the legitimacy which can only come from society as a whole.

Does the salvation of the university lie in acting in conformity with the commands of both the moral and political order? If so, can the university be the prophet of its time, creating sets of values for the future moral order of society, when at the same time it has to conform to the urgent demands of the here and now? Mass human resources development is the latest of the particularistic demands of society upon the university. In the final analysis, while the university must be willing to respond to these demands, it must also escape from total bondage to time and circumstance in order to pursue the eternal and universal. How can this be done?

Firstly, by universities becoming more effective and efficient as institutions and users of scarce resources. Modern universities are engaged in searching for ways in which to improve their efficiency in areas such as management techniques, learning and teaching systems, programme evaluation, research orientation and staff development. They may thus generate an internal dynamism for change and efficiency which would earn for them greater respect from the free market system, the political order, the moral order and other agencies involved in development.

Secondly, to enable them to serve society better, universities need far greater assistance than they normally receive. The concerns of a development-oriented society and the search for a more just world, prescribe far-reaching implications for university concepts, roles, and structures. Universities, when adequately assisted, are capable of generating sufficient dynamism to face up to today's challenges while at the same time rising above the bondage of contemporary particularism.