Overview

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INTRODUCTION

Dr Nagai underlined in his speech that at the beginning of the 21st century many problems are facing our universities as higher educational institutions. Trying to comment on this statement, to stress the role of universities in the 21st century, I would like to say that, in my opinion, those problems are challenges, which I find most significant, and are concerned with our function, our identity and our purpose. Those which I find most pressing are connected with our funding, organization and development. Those which I find most interesting are concerned with the impact of technology on teaching, and the need to develop flexible and innovative approaches to education.

Let's try to characterize these problems to make an effective contribution to the debate on the university in the 21st century.

THE CHALLENGE OF PURPOSE AND IDENTITY

Our first problem in a rapidly changing society, and under financial duress, is one of discharging an appropriate function. We may assume here that the universities are the institutions which society has evolved to handle knowledge. Universities of the future should be actively involved in codifying, transmitting and creating knowledge and helping society to use existing knowledge and adapt to new knowledge. To develop as a university, particularly in the 21st century, one must develop in all of these areas. It can be difficult when considering the actual development.

A related challenge for us concerns our identity. How can an institution develop further as a university while retaining its own clear character? How can one sensibly claim to be unique? The problem is of course a part of a wider national one but we will be forced very soon to answer these questions.

However, the most insidious danger facing us is that, in the struggle to defend our functions and establish our individual identity, we lose sight of the wider purpose which we must serve. Here we may state loud and clear, that the university of the 21st century must be a free and ordered space, for those who live there and for the country at large, a source and symbol of what can be and what we can do at our best.

This is the greatest challenge in developing in the future and running any university: one must strive to provide a free yet ordered space in which students learn to resolve the fundamental tensions between:

- freedom and order;
- initiative and organization;
- reflection and discipline;
- the individual and the system.

A free and ordered space is necessary, in which student and staff can grow in confidence and skills while absorbing tolerance and a wider understanding of many points of view.

But it is not enough, particularly at the beginning of the 21st century. Here all universities must struggle to strike the balance between knowledge and belief, between skills and attitudes, between developing competence and developing character.

Moving in the next century we must retain this balance while adapting to the huge progress of technology and the ever-increasing demands of society placed upon our services, quite apart from the tyranny of rising costs.

Over the next decade, and into the coming century, higher educational institutions will undergo major changes as they respond to a variety of social, economic and technological pressures. In social terms, they will have to expand greatly their student numbers, and to increase greatly their involvement in continuing education. In economic terms, they will have to carry through this expansion while controlling costs and increasing their financial independence. In technological terms, they will have to find efficient and efficacious, yet sensitive and relevant ways to seize the opportunities offered by developments in information technology.

The solution of the problem will require concentrated efforts. The universities of the 21st century will have to change from being institutions which are administered to institutions which are managed. This will not be easy.

SPAN OF INVOLVEMENT

The span of involvement of higher educational establishments in teaching and training will have to be greatly increased if access is to be extended at entry level and if there is to be an increase in continuing professional and adult education. Only by developing a very high degree of flexibility in course structures and delivery mechanisms will the benefits of technology for innovative teaching be realized fully and the full potential of the wide range of institutions involved in higher education be properly exploited.

Since teaching is of central importance in the university's activities, innovative methods and systems of teaching will play a key role in successful responses to the pressures we face. Three minor difficulties have to be overcome, namely:

- teaching is often not seen as of primary importance compared with research;
- existing arrangements, based on lectures, are often inefficient and inflexible;
- course structures are rigid, reflecting the organization of the institution into specialisms, departments and faculties with their rigid academic timetables.

If, as can be argued, technology is to play an important role in solving these problems, it will have to be used in an appropriate manner. Any changes will have to be guided by the best available practice in educational methods. It will be necessary to create a reward and promotion system which properly recompenses skilled, dedicated, innovative and successful teaching on an equal basis with achievement in research.

I have presented some of these problems which we will face in the near future, particularly at the beginning of the 21st century. The severity of these problems makes hard decisions inescapable. Generally, we will all be required to decide what we believe in, and where we stand. Sitting on fences will not be possible for anyone wishing to make an effective contribution to the development of higher education in the 21st century, quite apart from settling the proper role of the university of that century.