

3 CHALLENGES FACING UNIVERSITIES IN THE THIRD WORLD

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I am most profoundly honoured at the academic recognition that you have conferred upon me today -- it is a distinction in which I will take great pride, coming as it does from one of Southeast Asia's emerging centers of excellence. But let me quickly turn any attention away from myself and swing the spotlight to where it truly belongs -- on the young men and women who are receiving their degrees here at this 11th Convocation Ceremony of the Universiti Sains Malaysia. You are the ones truly deserving of our admiration and respect on this occasion.

In the careers that lie ahead for most of you, you will almost certainly find yourself pulled in two different directions -- the one along the cutting edge of modern science and technology, the other through the daily heartland of your own people's needs, their general poverty, their aspirations and values. Reconciling these two pulls may well constitute a continuing, and possibly the most profound dilemma that you will have to face in your professional lives as scholars and scientists of a developing country, involving decisions of both scientific use and social consciousness.

While these twin paths will continually beckon you and other individual scientists, they also exert very strong opposing pulls on university systems generally in the Third World. The strains they set up constitute one of three major challenges confronting universities in developing countries which I would like to examine briefly here with you.

On the one hand, there is the need for higher skills, indispensable for industrialization and the growth of the modern sector, if our countries are to be able to compete effectively in the modern world and redress and overcome their economic, scientific and technological dependencies. There is the need to help illuminate and assist governments and society on the correct technology choices. These choices have tremendous social, ethical and long-term structural implications quite apart from the many pressures bound to be brought by the purveyors of various kinds of technology who will descend upon us in growing numbers.

Moreover, it has also become clear that unless our capacities in the basic sciences are significantly enhanced, breakthroughs in certain areas of science and technology -- especially in biotechnology, communications and energy technology -- will work against us and major new dependencies may develop, further widening the deep gap between the North and South.

All of these needs have helped to determine the major scientific and intellectual thrust of most of our universities and -- quite legitimately -- they will continue to do so.

On the other hand, there are the inescapable and pressing problems of absolute and relative poverty often affecting the majority of our people. In particular, there are the so far seemingly intractable difficulties in overcoming the complexities of the structural dualism that is characteristic of so many former colonies or semi-colonies. This underlies the perpetual stagnation of the countryside, with growing material and cultural impoverishment and its attendant problems in health, education and housing, that only exacerbates and feeds the resulting urban crisis that is now looming ahead.

It is no great revelation to acknowledge that our knowledge base

necessary to address these problems is only fragmentary at best and certainly woefully inadequate to the search for more efficient policies. We need to know a good deal more about the complex of incentives and stimuli that might trigger the growth of local capabilities for innovation, technological improvement, organization and self-management without which it will be impossible to involve the poor actively and creatively in the development process and the life of the nation. Nor do we know enough about the social dynamics at the bottom layers of our society to help create the necessary political space for autonomy, self-expression and freedom.

So far, most of our universities have not been able to organize themselves in ways which would entice their best minds in adequate numbers to address these problems on the scale and with the comprehensiveness that their magnitude, urgency and complexity require. Obsolescent academic models, with their conventional criteria affecting professional choice and orientation, career expectations and rewards, still push too many of our creative minds in academia in the other direction.

What is required is that our universities manage to reconcile and integrate these conflicting tendencies and requirements within the same academic institutions. They must develop the social as well as the professional ethos needed to sustain this integration and redirect the scientific thrust toward breakthroughs in problems areas crucial to the future of their populations as a whole, including the poor. Unless the universities can manage to do this, there is little hope that we can develop the innovative trajectories for development and industrialization which would lead us, at acceptable social and political cost, towards the modernization of societies in ways that imitate neither West nor East but are more consonant with our basic cultural values and sense of overall purpose.

A second major challenge to Third World universities is posed both by the fragmentation of knowledge and the explosion in scientific knowledge. Fragmentation has arisen out of the need for disciplinary rigor and precision; however, it is often also the result of the rigidities and excessive compartmentalization of our universities. It is further perpetuated by giving way too easily to the intellectual or bureaucratic convenience of the researcher, policy-maker or administrator. One of the factors contributing to the failure of many development policies has been the narrow single disciplinary approach that ignores the political, social and cultural complexities of a particular development problem. The need now clearly is for a much more integrated multidisciplinary and even for a multidimensional approach that relates the search for solutions to the complex linkages between the local, national and international dimensions of many of these problems.

The knowledge explosion therefore challenges universities to develop, beyond the training for higher skills, a much greater capacity for critical judgement, selectivity and synthesis. Without this capacity, we are likely to continue to find ourselves overwhelmed by the sheer mass of information available and unable to make use of that which is relevant to our problems.

A third challenge stems from the pressures for admission to institutions of higher learning in the Third World. In part, this is because, rightly or wrongly, the universities in developing countries are seen as the main channel of admission into the elites. I will not here go into questions of how this might be changed. I think it crucial to note, however, that these pressures also reflect a growing hunger for knowledge on the part of various levels of society outside the university to which the university must respond in new ways.

These challenges are forcing the university in the Third World to re-examine its own role, its thrusts, its structures, and the processes of both creating and transmitting knowledge. New and innovative outreaches are required to bring knowledge, not only to students, but also, in appropriate ways, to the emerging middle class as well as to peasants and small traders -- each in their own way avid for knowledge relevant to their own advancement. Distance learning systems, drawing on the potential of new communication technologies and new teaching and learning methodologies could be used to see that new needs for scientific inputs at all levels of society are adequately met.

All this poses immensely difficult challenges to the universities of the Third World and raises profound questions of radical reform and gradual but far-reaching evolution. We must all confront them together and I would hope that the United Nations University and its activities might be seen as an initial but already significant response at the international level to the problems that we need to tackle together. These are problems that need to be dealt with at the highest levels of scientific response and social accountability that also touch the deepest levels of human understanding and compassion.

Let me say again in closing -- both as an Indonesian and as Rector of what I hope to be the first generation of a new type of global institution of higher learning -- how very proud I feel at the honour you have bestowed upon me here today. Thank you.