

Universities as Guardians of Man's Cultural Heritage: Leaders in Cultural Development *

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Our subject is related to Man; the individual, society and humanity at large. Hence, it is related to time and space; the past, the present and the future, where Man's activities take place. Man moves. He travels from one point towards another, reaching for the future, passing by the present.

The dimension of time and the sense of history are central to the concept of a university. A university as a system, and as an instrument of education, is very closely related to a deep complex concept of time. A modern university obviously exists in the present, but it has roots in the past, and aspirations for the future.

Since what we are is not just what we are at present, a deeper knowledge of the past becomes much more than mere acquisition of facts. It becomes the cultural heritage, a dynamic living body of interacting elements - a system.

"Cultural heritage" is obviously a loaded term, open to bias, distortion and misuse. It can not be a totally objective concept. The selection of what constitutes the cultural heritage is open to omission and commission. When sounding objective, and scientific, it could be a disguise for rigidity and authoritarianism. Even when open-mindedness and reasonableness are accepted in principle they are often opposed in application. They could even be viewed as a waste of time and as an unnecessary denial of the obvious. By the less secure they could be viewed as an evil or a sin.

Cultural heritage refers not only to a product but also to a process. It is expected to invite agreement and disagreement, based on a variety of interpretations including conflicting ones - and conflicting interests. Hence it needs a *guardian*. According to Webster, a guardian is one that guards; one to whom a person or a thing is committed for protection, security or preservation. A guardian is needed whenever protection or preservation is needed.

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Throughout the history of university education, from the Greek universities to eminent Moslem and Arab universities in their golden age, up to those of today, these institutions have played this role of a guardian, frequently to the extent of being associated with advocating conservatism. This produces both balanced and unbalanced reactions, disputes, conflicts and pressures to change.

Thus one most important task for any university is to deal with this situation in addition to doing all that is possible to guard the present and the future from being over-influenced by the past - glorious as it may be. This balance is a major and delicate role. It is a role of a university to realize that a healthy growing society has roots. It is the university that can nourish the roots of a society not only by not holding back from development, but by extending and expanding its possibilities.

One common-sense way out of this controversial situation is to develop a set of agreed-upon criteria in order to define and limit the role of a guardian, by guarding against over-emphasizing the past, and by paving the way for a proper role in preparing for change, which is always at work now and on into the future. A rationally accepted concept, interpretation and selection of Man's cultural heritage should be preserved and nourished - even revived.

No matter what the intention of establishing a university may be, and with all the narrow over-conservative talk about heritages, university systems allow, permit and normally prepare for, the speeding up of change and development.

Such a concept of the university requires a dedication and freedom to inquire, to think, to explore, to test and to learn. Such a concept cannot be fulfilled without accepting and accommodating differences in thinking, attitudes and findings. Clearly such differences exist and will continue to exist, in various forms and varying intensity in any society. But in a university, as a society and as education, differences are supposed to be managed (not controlled). The interaction among different members is supposed to be based on some level of respect and acknowledgement of the right to differ. And differences are supposed, also, to find their roots in reason.

With this openness, basic to university existence, more knowledge will be acquired faster, actions and behaviour relevant to new knowledge will change, and a whole chain of faster social changes and cultural development will take place in what might be called a continuously and dynamically newer world or worlds.

Technological, economic, political and societal forces are affecting the shape and direction of our world today. Improved knowledge is intensifying and speeding up their various effects. While slow change might be predicted in terms of direction and speed, prediction would not be so simple when elements of change in cultural development multiply and speed accelerates.

We take development to be global, meaningful, relevant and open-ended. Development here is not partial, piecemeal, or aimed at an increase of productivity at any cost. It is not an end in itself. It is related to man and to his culture. Models of relevant cultural development and modernization are various, by definition; they are certainly not Western alone. When Westernization, as a model of development, is tried out of context, it will turn into something else, less meaningful and less valued. What is valuable is development relevant to present society. What is needed is an education and a university system relevant to the society they serve, from the standpoint of output as well as cost.

Universities and all centres of higher learning and research that are not squarely involved and responsible for speeding up change and development tend towards obsolescence.

If other institutions, those of industry sometimes for example, can look at change as mere happenings, the university, which ought to have a global outlook, has to view change and development in terms of goals. In this difference lies the quality of dynamic and cultural leadership.

We cannot decide what the purpose of a university should be without knowing the goals the society which nurtures it sets for itself. But who is better qualified to define, deduce, speculate and describe what these goals are, than university people themselves. Thus it becomes imperative for a university to plan its role and direction in the light of societal goals assumed and tested by the university. And in so far as this image of society and societal movement is dynamically real, the university as a concept can be relevant to it, and as a fact can be a leader in cultural development.

The modern world represents a unified/diversified cultural heritage and so a modern university is part of the world-wide university community working for development and trying to balance its own situation with that of the world at large.

Leadership, in any area and in any sense, implies a concept of a system, a system of certain qualities and substance. Leadership is not a mere declaration. It is a capacity that must be demonstrated. Universities have the right to claim leadership in cultural development but only if they take their role as guardians of the cultural heritage seriously and maintain their standards in a dedicated manner.

As an elaboration of the obvious, the essence of university leadership, in the area of cultural development, is the ability to lead. Moreover, the essence of the need for the university in this area is in its ability to perform what was not, and cannot be, performed as competently by others. Competent performance of cultural development is a very complex and serious matter. It refers to the future

of Man and to the totality of human existence. It cannot be taken lightly for universities are complex and serious institutions. In fact they are as serious and complex as Man himself.

The realness and reality of a university is based upon the need for such an institution.