

Role Of Universities In Modern Times

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THE modern role of universities in a society is an important issue in a world which is rapidly changing. Due to rapid changes in society over the last few decades, the needs and aspirations of society have also changed and increased. Since universities are an integral part of a society, so their role and functions have needed to change in order to meet the needs and aspirations of the people. Although the universities have a clear role in the overall development of society, they have nevertheless been faced with serious problems due to inadequate funding and investment in the field of higher education. Moreover, this problem has been compounded within universities for lack of efficient management practices.

Development of Universities

The concept of a university developed in the medieval period under the jurisdiction of the Catholic Church, where the students belonged to an international fraternity held together by the wide authority of the church. The word 'university', which was derived from a Latin word 'universitas', means 'the whole' or 'a society'. Thus, in the light of medieval academic use a university might be defined as an association of teachers and students organized in a particular centre to disseminate knowledge to young people.

At the end of the 15th century, there were in all 70 universities. Their great contribution to society was to produce educated people for the administration of human affairs. Their graduates occupied positions of responsibility in church and state and became immensely influential in forming the ideas and even guiding the politics of their time. They constituted an intellectual commonwealth with similar functions and objectives with the same ideal, fulfilling the same functions, and exchanging teachers and students. This isomorphism continued until the Reformation and the rise of nationalism in Europe.

Before the end of the 19th century, the universities of Europe had become differentiated under the influence of the respective communities they served. For example, in Italy, higher education divided into small units and was administered by government officials in a bureaucracy which was not particularly best qualified to manage the system. The universities in France suffered from total central government control which stifled local managerial initiative. On the other hand, the universities of Germany and Britain were in

a better position in relation to state control than the others. The changes that took place in these universities were different in nature, although both these models were elitist in character. Germany introduced a new dimension in identifying universities as research institutes, a direct consequence of their changing circumstances, which was concern for knowledge, its increase and dissemination. Moreover, the German universities were intended to serve the professional needs of the state. On the other hand, the British universities took a different path of adaptation. The central idea of these universities (e.g. Oxford, Cambridge) was the concept of liberal education which stressed individual needs, the quality of teaching and the special value of the tutor-student relationship. Until late into the 19th century, Oxford and Cambridge mainly catered to the need of the privileged class of their society. However, the next generation of British universities (Leeds, Birmingham, Manchester) resulted from the Industrial Revolution in the 19th century. They had a somewhat different function of producing professionals and scientists.

After the Second World War, the rapid expansion in the number of universities was rooted in economic and social purpose. In Britain, in addition to the new universities of the mid-sixties, some colleges of advanced technology (Bath, Bradford) were converted into universities with the express purpose of training large numbers of engineers and technologists in an increasingly scientific world. In Scotland, the universities were admirably adapted to the social environment. The universities were open to all without entrance examinations and there was a provision of very modest fees. These universities supplied scientists, engineers, and doctors for the benefit of society. Moreover, they concentrated equally on both research and teaching and worked specially on the supply of trained manpower in the field of new sciences and technologies.

In America, Harvard was a straight transplant of the Oxbridge model. But common American were not interested at the time in giving their sons up to a European schooling in Latin and Greek. Instead, they demanded technical and utilitarian

higher education for the benefit of their rural life. As a result, the first polytechnic was established in early 19th century aiming at preparing teachers who would instruct the sons and daughters of local farmers and craftsmen. This utilitarian higher education gained momentum through the 19th century.

The concept of American 'land grant' colleges in the mid-19th century was a unique example for the benefit of the common people. In each state about thirty thousand acres of land were put aside with a view to forming a perpetual fund for a higher education institution, with the particular purpose of stimulating local agricultural development. These colleges have become state universities and the 'land grant' universities form a particularly select group of US colleges. Their existence is not solely in order to educate the young people; they are service stations for the whole community, bringing together the university and society.

Throughout the centuries, universities have been established throughout the world in response to the needs of societies.

Constraints and Challenges

The early universities were established for the pursuit of knowledge and to disseminate this knowledge to the students. In those days universities had relatively sufficient finances and limited numbers of students and staff. Gradually, they became more responsive to the requirements of society by producing educated and trained manpower. Universities now play an important role in the economic growth of a country, which requires huge human and physical resources. Although they have a clear importance for economic and social development, they are nevertheless facing an investment crisis throughout the world. In fact, reductions in public expenditure and the loss of confidence in higher education have caused real problems for the financial survival of institutions.

The last few decades have been the period of the greatest and most rapid expansion of higher education. According to UNESCO, the number of students in higher education worldwide grew from 13 million in 1960 to 28 million in 1970, 46 million in 1980 and 65 million in 1991. Thus,

the number of students in higher education has more than doubled over the last 20 years. Most developing countries experienced rapid increases in enrolment during this period. The figures for the developing countries were from 3 million in 1960 to 7 million in 1970, 16 million in 1980 and 30 million in 1991, marking the proportion of student enrolment from the developing countries increasing from 23.1 per cent in 1960 to 46.2 per cent in 1991. It is, however, observed that the enrolment ratio in the developed countries was much higher than the developing countries which was 40.2 per cent and 14.1 per cent respectively in 1991 demonstrating a significant inequality of access to higher education institutions between developed and developing countries.

With increased enrolment and expansion, the cost of university education has also been increased tremendously but, in the majority of cases allocation of resources for higher education has not been increased proportionately in real terms due to macro-economic conditions and increased competition for scarce public funds, thus obliging many institutions to make cutbacks in their budgets, study programmes, modernization of infrastructure library holdings, international cooperation and even academic staff. The result has been to require university managers to do more with less than is needed for better institutional management in order to make more efficient use of available human and material resources, thus accepting their accountability towards society. It is, therefore, the challenge for university administration and management to prove their effectiveness in the achievement of the university objectives by becoming much more responsive to the demands and needs of a rapidly changing society and by making the best use of limited resources.

Let us now examine some certain and likely developments for the universities in the near future:

The pressure for students' expansion in higher education is likely to continue to rise, but it can be assumed that the universities' financial condition will not permit a corresponding rise in the number of staff members or other related facilities.

The pressure for the relaxation of entry requirements to higher education will rise and the concept of the single-subject degree will increasingly be undermined.

(To be continued)