

The Viable University

Are there any basic conditions that have to be met if the university is to be viable as an institution for the pursuit of science and scholarship? This is a difficult and contentious subject on which those who occupy positions of authority and dignity rarely speak on ceremonial occasions such as a university convocation. Since I occupy no such position, I shall take the liberty of addressing this question plainly and candidly.

Universities had been in existence for almost a hundred years when the country became independent in 1947. The first among them were set up under colonial rule to serve a specific set of objectives. In the early decades of their existence their main objectives were the regulation of syllabuses, the conduct of examinations and the award of degrees. Teaching was done in the colleges and some research was done in institutions such as the Asiatic Society and the Association for the Cultivation of Science. There were also various Surveys, such as the Geological Survey, the Archaeological Survey and the Botanical Survey which undertook research of a certain kind.

Having become established, the universities, or at least some among them, began to aim higher. Some of the Indian vice-chancellors were outstanding personalities who did not share the sceptical attitude of their British counterparts towards the prospects of the Indian university as a centre of learning. Sir Ashutosh Mukherji initiated the process of building post-graduate departments in the arts and the sciences in the University of Calcutta in the early decades of the twentieth century. These departments sought to embody the unity of teaching and research, and brought together scholars and scientists of the highest rank. The work they did in the university achieved great renown, and they set an example for academics throughout the country.

But it has to be remembered that these centres of excellence in science and scholarship were few and far between and they were small in size. Their material resources were

limited, but they were insulated from social and political pressures to provide open access to all. They were selective in their admissions and appointments, and they expanded slowly and in response to the growth of science and scholarship throughout the world.

Outside a few islands of excellence, the production of graduates remained the main preoccupation for those responsible for the support and maintenance of the universities from their inception till the time of independence. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the universities played an important part in the growth and expansion of a new middle class by providing the education and the certification necessary for securing employment as clerks, teachers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, managers and so on. 'Advancement of learning' may have been the motto of the University of Calcutta from the start, but those who knocked at its portals in increasing numbers did so less from the thirst for disinterested knowledge than from the prospects for middle class employment opened up by a university degree. The new middle class needed the universities because without them entry into that class and advancement within it would be impossible.

* * *

Many of those who genuinely hoped for the advancement of learning felt that the independence of India would provide a new departure in the life of the university which could be made into a real home for science and scholarship. There were good reasons behind the hope for a new beginning. The colonial administration was at best half-hearted in its support for the universities it had created and maintained. It did not support them for being repositories of the values for which the universities stood in Europe and America, but for the more limited purpose of producing the manpower necessary for running the imperial system.

At first things seemed to augur well for a new beginning for the universities in independent India. Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister, placed a high value on science and scholarship, and took a personal interest in their advancement. He himself

had never studied in an Indian university, but his experience of Cambridge, one of the great universities of the world, had given him a sense of the part the university could play in the life of a nation.

In a convocation address to the University of Allahabad in the very first year of independence, Nehru had emphasized the values which the universities, as centres of science and scholarship, embodied. He had said, 'A university stands for humanism, for tolerance, for progress, for the adventure of ideas and the search for truth. It stands for the onward march of the human race towards ever higher objectives. If the universities discharge their duties adequately, then it is well with the nation and the people'. He also struck a note of warning, for he went on to say, 'But if the temple of learning itself becomes a home of narrow bigotry and petty objectives, how then will the nation prosper or a people grow in stature'? (Nehru 1958: 333).

Nehru obviously had forebodings about the disruptive role that factionalism and the divisions of caste and community could play in the universities, and he did not hesitate to speak his mind on the subject. At a convocation of the Aligarh Muslim University held barely a month after the Allahabad convocation, he said, 'I do not like this university being called the Muslim University just as I do not like the Benares University to be called the Hindu University' (Ibid.: 338). Which leader of this great nation can speak like that today?

Despite their forebodings, Nehru and his colleagues sought to move forward with the creation of more and better institutions for the nurturance of science and scholarship. The new government wasted no time in setting up a University Education Commission under Dr S Radhakrishnan in 1948. Radhakrishnan had been a professor of philosophy at the University of Calcutta in its best years, and later became the Spalding Professor at Oxford. Like Nehru, he wanted the university to be an open and secular institution and he warned against the imposition of any social and political agenda on the university that might jeopardise its academic standards. He was against the rationing of seats among

castes and communities, and said, 'Education should not be used for creating or deepening the very inequalities it is designed to prevent' (Government of India 1950: 52).

There was a genuine desire in the wake of independence to create a university that would be different from one that was primarily an institution for the production of graduates and with examination and the award of degrees as its primary concerns. Many of the leaders in the fields of science and scholarship had been exposed to the best universities in the west and been inspired by their achievements. The type of university that served as the inspiration for many has been called the 'Humboldtian university' (Shils 1997: 234-49) after Wilhelm von Humboldt who created its prototype in the University of Berlin in 1810. Humboldt's university first established its presence in Europe, and especially Germany, and then extended its influence into the United States. It had its greatest influence from the middle of the nineteenth to the middle of the twentieth century when the era of the mass university began.

This type of university which prevailed at Berlin, Jena, Heidelberg, Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Princeton, Chicago and elsewhere was a small and compact community of scientists and scholars. It was an open and secular institution, or at least became increasingly open and secular with the passage from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. It sought to embody the unity of teaching and research, and to cover within its scope all principal disciplines from physics to philosophy. It also sought to embody the principle of self-governance and to insulate itself from interference by church and state. It was very different in character and composition from the mass universities that gained increasing ground after World War II and decolonization (Shils op cit: 3-128).

* * *

Some have begun to wonder if the Humboldtian university can survive even in the United States where it had attained its greatest success by the middle of the twentieth century (Shils 1997). What I would like to discuss here is the prospect of that kind of university in India in the twenty-first century. The problems that face the Indian university today

are many and diverse, and yet there are those who speak and write about them as if they believe that we might, by some feat of ingenuity, be able to create here the kind of university that enjoyed such great success in the western countries for more than a hundred years (Béteille 2009).

Our own older universities, the ones that were set up before independence – Calcutta, Bombay, Madras, Delhi, Agra, Mysore, and so on – have expanded enormously in size. Many of the new ones are also very large. Today, they count their members not in the thousands but in the hundreds of thousand.

The Humboldtian university, designed to be a community of scholars and scientists committed to the unity of teaching and research, was very small in size. Right until World War II such universities as Cambridge, Oxford, Harvard, Princeton and Chicago had a membership of only a few thousand. Even today, when the size of such a university approaches 20,000, its reflective members begin to worry if it is not becoming a ‘mass university’. As a sociologist, I am only too well aware that a radical change in the size of an institution leads inevitably to changes in its form and functioning. In what follows I will speak mainly of the older type of universities which seek to cover all branches of knowledge as against some of the newer ones with a more specific focus, as on law, agriculture or education. Personally speaking, when I think of the Indian university, my mind turns inevitably to the University of Calcutta where I was a student or the University of Delhi where I have taught for many years.

As I have pointed out, the typical Indian university has expanded enormously in size and scale of operation in the last half century. It is difficult to see how the all-purpose university, with its mandate to cover every subject, can be restrained in its drive for expansion. At the same time, the more it expands, the further it departs from the ideal of the university as a community of scholars and scientists.

In the nineteenth century it did not appear unrealistic for the university to seek to accommodate all the principle disciplines even when each of them remained relatively

small in size. The number of disciplines considered suitable for adoption by the university was itself small. This has changed drastically in course of time. Well into the twentieth century, the universities remained highly selective in adopting new subjects and courses of study. Some instruction, mainly of a technical nature, was provided outside the university, and some research too was done outside it. It was through a strict definition of what constituted an academic discipline that the universities were able to remain small and yet sustain the belief that they were responsible for the cultivation of all significant branches of learning.

The last two hundred years have witnessed an enormous growth in systematic knowledge. The universities have contributed substantially to this growth, but it will be a mistake to believe that they alone have contributed to it. In the nineteenth century many of the pioneers of what were to be adopted later by the universities as branches of social science worked outside them. David Ricardo, John Stuart Mill, Walter Bagehot, Herbert Spencer and E B Tylor all worked outside the universities to lay the foundations of what are now taught as academic subjects in the universities. It is true that Karl Marx had a first-rate education in the best universities, but he did all his creative work outside them.

The expansion of knowledge has been accompanied by differentiation and specialization. The universities played a major part in this. They defined the boundaries of disciplines, and served to separate one discipline from another by organizing them into departments and faculties. But they were not alone in doing so. The emerging professional associations also contributed to the differentiation and specialization of disciplines.

Before academic specialization had attained its present scale, it was possible for scholars, whether within or outside the universities, to interact fruitfully and meaningfully across a variety of fields. The same scholar published treatises on what would now be regarded as quite different academic disciplines. Herbert Spencer, the most renowned British sociologist in the nineteenth century published books on a great variety of subjects. He began with *Principles of Statics*, and subsequently published *Principles of Biology*, *Principles of Psychology*, and, then, *Principles of Sociology*. He did not hold any

university position but worked for some time as sub-editor for *The Economist* of which Walter Bagehot, the author of a renowned work on the English constitution, was the editor.

Things began to change as the division of labour between disciplines became more and more elaborate in the twentieth century. The universities themselves played an important part in this by organizing and reorganizing disciplines into, departments, faculties, schools and centres. Much of the impulse for the creation and adoption of new disciplines came from ambitious and energetic deans and heads who sought to expand and consolidate their own spheres of influence. Today the disciplines and fields of study and research recognized by the universities and accommodated in them number in the scores. At least in India, the resolve to promote inter-disciplinary study and research has had little effect in creating active lines of communication among the increasing number of disciplines and branches of study. The idea that the multi-purpose university covering all branches of study from physics to philosophy via computer science, gender studies and peace studies can function as a single community of scholars and scientists has become increasingly remote from the reality.

There are other reasons why the universities have expanded their scale of operation. In India the most important among these is the urge to make them socially more inclusive through the accommodation of all classes and communities, and all sections of society. The socially-inclusive university is an idea of the twentieth century, and more particularly of the second half of it. It was only after World War II and decolonization that the universities came under increasing pressure to become socially more inclusive and began to expand their scale of operation in response to that pressure (Béteille 2009).

* * *

The universities have expanded their size and scale of operation, and they have acquired many new functions in the course of their expansion. It is in this context that we must ask whether each single university can adequately perform all the tasks of teaching,

research and examination in the entire range of recognized disciplines that it is expected to perform. My view is that the university of the twenty-first century must limit its scale of operation, and, hence, its ambition to be a 'universal' site for the creation and transmission of systematic knowledge.

I have heard many high-minded scholars and scientists, including some of my own colleagues, say that our universities have sunk to the status of factories for the production of BAs, MAs, and PhDs without any serious concern for standards of teaching and research. But our first universities were set up in 1857 not for undertaking teaching and research but for conducting examinations and awarding degrees. Hence, if that is now the major concern of so many of our universities, it is not a deviation from the original purpose of the Indian university, but a return to it.

The university cannot disown its responsibility to produce graduates, but it must at least try to ensure that it is not overwhelmed by that one single responsibility. Producing employable graduates is an important responsibility of the university, but it is not its sole responsibility and not, in every case, even its main responsibility.

There are many reasons why the pressure on the universities to produce more graduates will not decrease in the foreseeable future but increase. India has an expanding middle class whose expansion will not brook any restraint. As the ranks of the salaried middle class expand, the need for more graduates will also expand. The universities at Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, unlike those at Cambridge, Oxford and Paris, were set up to nurture the growth of an educated middle class, and it is difficult to see how they can renege on this responsibility when that class is acquiring increasing importance not only politically and culturally but also demographically.

University degrees cannot eliminate social inequality, but they are an important aid to individual mobility. What social and political commentators usually mean when they say that they want inequality to be ended is that they want the obstacles to individual mobility to be removed or relaxed. The universities may not have brought inequality to an end,

but they have acted as important catalysts for individual mobility. This may not be the same thing as the advancement of science and scholarship, but it is nevertheless an important social function in a democracy.

Nobody can deny that the universities have contributed something to individual mobility, first by enabling individuals to move into the middle class as clerks and other lower-grade non-manual employees, and then by enabling their offspring to move upward in that class as lawyers, doctors and civil servants. Many feel, however, that they have not contributed enough to this process and should be required to contribute more. How much more they can contribute to individual mobility and through what procedures is not a subject that I can discuss on this occasion. But one thing should be clear: we cannot force the pace of individual mobility through university education too far or for too long without compromising the academic standards of the university.

In a country that is as large and as diverse as ours we must look at the university system as a whole. In our circumstances today it is not necessary for each and every university to undertake all the major activities that must come under the care of the university system of a nation. Not all universities can be expected to give the same attention to undergraduate and post-graduate teaching, or to teaching and research. But whatever it might do, no university in the twenty-first century can be exempted from the responsibility of conducting examinations and awarding degrees. At the same time, that responsibility will remain a serious, not to say an unbearable, burden if each university has to conduct examinations for hundreds of thousands of students every year.

The universities of the twenty-first century cannot be set up with the same objectives with which our first universities were set up in 1857; nor, when set up, should they be encouraged to follow the same trajectories that the earlier ones did. We have accepted the principle that a university today does not have to be universal in its coverage of disciplines in order to engage in the combined pursuit of teaching and research at the highest level of excellence.

If the new universities seek to be all-encompassing like the old ones, they are not likely to meet with much success in the twenty-first century. Universities, like many other public institutions in India, have a natural tendency to expand. Many of them have in the recent past been willing to undertake whatever was required of them, provided funds were made available. Universities can be effective as centres of advanced study and research only if they exercise restraint in what they undertake to do. They must not expand recklessly even if this means a limitation on the funds they are able to secure and on the powers that their vice-chancellors can exercise.

An institution will scarcely deserve to be called a university if it undertakes only teaching and no research, or only research and no teaching. And it will not deserve that name if it is devoted exclusively to only one single discipline. There is no reason to move from an extremely wide to an unduly narrow band of subjects. The viable university that I have in mind will have a cluster of disciplines with, perhaps, a core and a periphery. Not all universities need to have the same core or the same periphery.

The kind of university that had its greatest success in the second and third quarters of the twentieth century had at its core the arts and sciences, comprising disciplines such as philosophy, history, languages, mathematics, physics and chemistry with professional subjects such as law and medicine at the periphery (Parsons and Platt 1973). Harvard is an outstanding example. That kind of university will and should continue to exist in the future. But there will be other types as well, with science and technology, or economics and management, or law, or education at the core. The cluster has to be carefully selected and organized; it cannot be some *ad hoc* arrangement put together from existing institutions that are themselves declining or moribund. Again, such an institution can prosper in the future only if its reckless expansion is prevented.

André Béteille

References

Béteille, André. 2009. *Universities in the Twenty-first Century*. New Delhi: National University of Educational Planning and Administration (Third Foundation Day Lecture).

Government of India. 1950. *The Report of the University Education Commission, 1948-49*. New Delhi: Ministry of Education.

Nehru, Jawaharlal. 1958. *Speeches: 1946-49*. New Delhi: Government of India, vol. 1.

Parsons, Talcott and Gerald M Platt. 1973. *The American University*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

Shils, Edward. 1997. *The Calling of Education*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.