

THE UNIVERSITY IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY

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ABSTRACT

*In this article the universality and in particular also the particularity of the university are dealt with. The author points out the indissoluble link between the university and the community, and also stresses that the university **may** not remain at a distance or be cold about the society in which it finds itself. Developing communities in Africa have held unrealistic expectations about what education (and the universities) would be able to do within their societies. These expectations, however, did not materialize. The university in a developing community, therefore, today has a far greater task than its peer in any other community: the former is not only **within** the community, but **is** part of it. For that reason this university should also take the lead with regard to the solution of present problems in the community; it has an educational objective, has to provide guidance and has to counsel the community in time regarding problems that will still be encountered.*

When we refer to a “university” we normally think of an educational institution designed for the instruction and/or examination of students in all or many of the more important branches of advanced learning; as an institution conferring degrees in various faculties; an institution which vibrates with student activities, etc.

Originally the word *university* meant a group of individuals inspired by a common purpose. In this case it referred to a guild of learners, both teachers and students, analogous to craft guilds with their masters and apprentices (Wallbank a.o., 1978).

In more modern terms a university can best be described as a community of *scholars* (academic staff) and *students* (as learners) concerned with the pursuit of knowledge, and dedicated to the nurturing of leaders for the *universitatis*. A university plays the role of *innovator* as well as *conservator*. As innovator it creates the setting for cultivating the questing habit of mind and bringing about changes, bringing forth *new* knowledge, and is therefore not only

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concerned with *static* knowledge but especially with *dynamic* knowledge. The university also has the role of *conservator*, that is, of preserving the traditional culture and values of the past in respect of the society it serves (cf. Behr, n.d., p. 1).

The latter reference immediately calls for a closer scrutiny of the role and functions of a university.

THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF A UNIVERSITY

The modern university as an institution in the Western World can be traced back to 842 A.D. when the first *Universitas* (referring to the universality of studies) was founded in Pavia by Charles the Great, Emperor of the Roman Empire. It was followed by the establishment of the University of Bologna in about 1076. From the 12th century onwards came the great universities of Paris, Oxford, Cambridge, Amsterdam, Leiden, Harvard, etc., to mention but a few (cf. Behr, n.d.). From these institutions emerged, in the course of the years, numerous learned and illustrious men and women in all spheres of life, paving the way for the achievements and inventions of modern society.

It is, however, well to remember that these early universities were not the privilege of all. It was only a small section of the population who *could* attend (and afford to attend) these institutions where the pursuit of knowledge and shaping the minds of their scholars were the daily activities. No wonder that these institutions later on became known as “ivory towers”, institutions far remote from the activities and well-being of the ordinary citizens.

In modern times the role and functions of a university have changed considerably. The Van Wyk De Vries Commission (1974) describes the function of the university for example as: to advance learning; to educate and to mould; to provide professional training; and in addition, it must instil in the student common standards of good citizenship. The Commission thus sees the university as having a broadly formal and formative educational function concerned with moulding the student into a complete mature human being. The university can thus not dissociate itself from the society in which it finds itself.

The Robbins Committee on Higher Education in Great Britain (1963) (cf. Behr, 1980) defined the aims of university education in a somewhat different way: (i) to give instruction in skills suitable to play a part in general

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division of labour; (ii) to teach in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind; (iii) to provide, in collaboration with the family, that background of culture and social habit upon which a healthy society depends; and (iv) to advance learning.

According to the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education in the U.S.A. (Behr, 1980) the function of a university is (i) to enhance the personal development of the student; (ii) to enhance human capability in society at large; (iii) to increase social justice through greater equality of opportunity for individuals to obtain the benefits of an advanced education; (iv) to advance learning for its own sake through science, scholarship and the creative arts; and (v) to evaluate society for the sake of its own renewal.

The references above should suffice to outline the role and functions of a university. At least one common denominator is clear: *a university is enmeshed in the society of which it is part*. As a matter of fact no educational system can escape from the society in which it operates; it *must* reflect what the society *wants* it to reflect. More specifically, says Moulder (1980), education has to contend with the environment in which it is given: with the family, the community, the media of mass communications, advertising, propaganda: in short, with the culture.

This idea is not new. Alexander Meiklejohn already argued on similar lines in 1932 (Leavis, 1979:15):

“This closeness of connection between the character of a society and the character of its education cannot be too strongly stressed. Schools and colleges are not something apart from the social order to which they belong. They are that order trying to prepare its youth for participation in its own activities. And a society can only teach the hopes, the knowledge, the values, the beliefs which it has.”

It will therefore be interesting to trace the development of education (and university education in particular) in developing societies. Before we do so we have to look at yet another question.

HOW UNIVERSAL IS A UNIVERSITY?

Perhaps one should begin by saying that a university, by its very nature (or ‘idea’), is universal. Aspects of this *universality* of a university were already touched upon in the previous section: to provide opportunities for learning;

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to contribute towards the development of knowledge in various fields; to promote the personal development of the student; to aid in the development of society; etc.

On the other hand the *particularity* of a university is also embodied in the said references: the fact that a university is part and parcel of the society in which it operates and that it cannot escape the culture of the people it serves, makes each university unique in *character* and in its *task* to contribute towards the betterment of society. The fact that the University of Malawi offers a course in “Development and Change” in order to make the student aware of economic, social, traditional and other changes in Malawi (cf. du Plessis, 1972), does not destroy the universality of that university, but merely emphasizes its particularity. The fact that Howard University in Washington gives active attention to the place and role of the university in Negro life in America does not make it less ‘universal’ than other universities.

The *particularity* of Howard University’s task and character is undoubtedly captured in its President’s own words (Du Plessis, 1972:108):

“The total resources of this University will be mobilized to engage the entire spectrum of social problems which have emerged as crisis in our national life. Here we shall seek and find creative and imaginative ways to bring solutions to the problems of the cities, the problems of human relations, the problems of educational disadvantage, the problems of economic insufficiency, the problems of inadequate health care, and to the problems related to overcoming the lack of knowledge, understanding and appreciation of Black American and Black people throughout the world.”

No wonder that it struck Du Plessis (1972) at that time how proud the Negro professors were of their University.

Each university, when truly concerned about its task in the community, will develop (and be proud of) an identity of its own. At the official opening of the University of the Dutch Antilles in 1979, the Governor, Drs B.M. Leito, spoke with pride of the establishment of an own university, since “... met de oprichting van de Universiteit van de Nederlandse Antillen, in de goede betekenis meer gestalte kan worden gegeven aan onze eigen identiteit. Dit niet alleen door het karakteristieke in haar opzet als Universiteit naar Caraïbisch patroon, maar vooral door haar praktische betrokkenheid bij de omstandigheden in het eigen land” (Leito, 1980:371).

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Further: when promoting the personal development of each individual, the university is promoting at the *same time* its universal *and* particular functions, since the 'improved' individual will have to take up a *particular function* in a *particular society*: "Zo zijn persoonlijke ontplooiing en voorbereiding voor een functie in de samenleving twee, zij het frequent, met elkaar vervlochten taken van het hoger onderwijs ..." (Pais, 1978:16).

Conclusion: cast in general terms one may therefore say that the idea of a university is *universal*, yet the character and the task remain *particular*.

In the light of this background we will now consider the position in developing societies.

EDUCATION FOR DEVELOPMENT — THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

In a most revealing essay on the above issue, A.J. Vos (1981) considered the role and effect of education in some African states. During the fifties and the sixties of this century leaders in the newly independent African states came to the conclusion that formal school education was the only route that would lead their people to attain the riches of their erstwhile colonial masters. Therefore, they pressed for compulsory free primary education as a first priority, and stated as their ideal large-scale expansions of the educational system at all levels.

This policy, however, resulted in an imbalance in the school system: more children completed their primary school course than there were places for in the secondary schools; the emphasis on primary education necessitated the double session system, putting heavy burdens on both teachers and pupils; etc. Further: a depopulation of the rural areas took place; uncontrolled urbanization and unemployment were rife. This further resulted in political instability, since education awakened expectation amongst the population which could not be realized. Education thus actually created a force which undermined the political stability.

The need for highly skilled manpower shifted the expansion programme to investment in secondary, technical, industrial and agricultural training as well as to university education. There was, for example, great enthusiasm for the establishment of universities in the developing countries. The universities were of the first institutions that did not come up to expectations since a university as such or university training in itself. Did not immediately

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solve the problems of society. Higher education could not make poor countries rich all of a sudden. In the industrial field steel mills and large manufacturing plants, says Vos (1981), did not suddenly arise because there were skilled people available to operate them. Curriculum adaptations to enhance the dignity of labour and to foster agricultural development were not a success. As a matter of fact, so many students developed an apathy toward agriculture and manual labour that many African countries became importers of products that were formerly exported.

Vos (1981) then came to the conclusion that it is an illusion that education, in the narrow sense of school learning, can and will bring about the desired changes and standards of living to establish a socially and economically progressive society.

Louw (1978) and Moulder (1980) came to similar conclusions: there is no truth in the belief that formal schooling or education is an absolute prerequisite for the development of a society where development means the industrialisation of the country or the living standards of all the peoples. Education, says Moulder (1980), is hardly in a position to remedy the handicaps and the injustices to socially and economically underprivileged people. It is naive to expect an educational system to develop intelligent human beings if all the forces of the culture are directed, for example, towards developing producers and consumers. There is simply no reason to believe, therefore, that 'education' is an effective means of remedying social and economic inequalities.

At university level it resulted in the fact that thousands of students kept on pursuing university studies, in many instances utterly unsuitable to them, and unsuitable for equipping them to help in a meaningful way with the development of their society. "Too many students attend school or university in the belief that a cultural coating obtained from sufficient immersion in classics, sciences, and other learned fluids will somehow insure them against the disgrace of physical work" (Louw, 1978:78).

WHAT SHOULD HAVE HAPPENED?

According to Louw (1978) the greatest error that was made was to assume that *Education* was an isolated or cloistered institution which could be interpreted by itself, without regard for the forces of change that were and are sweeping the world. Louw then proceeds to present the so-called Myrdal model of economic development which shows clearly the position and function of education in society (Louw, 1978:76). This model shows that the location of an industry leads

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- to the expansion of local employment;
- to the increase of trained industrial labour and more jobs;
- to the attraction of capital and enterprise;
- to the expansion of service industries and;
- to the expansion of general wealth of the community;
- to the expansion of local government funds through increased local tax yields, which only then provides
- a better infrastructure for population and industrial development, and to roads, factory sites, public utilities, health and *education services*, etc.

From this model it is clear that industrialization *must precede* educational services. *The need for better schooling and better educated people grew out of the phenomenal development of the technological era.* (Compare Toffler (1978) who claimed that it was the industrial revolution that brought about mass education.) If it takes place the other way round, it is akin to harnessing the cart in front of the horses. Although a country's gross national product and its educational level tend to grow together, this is not necessarily so. Moulder (1980) quotes the example of Brazil and Japan: Brazil has one of the fastest growing economies in the world, yet its educational level is lower, in proportion to the population, than it was before its economic expansion began. Japan was on its way to become an industrial world power *before* the introduction of vocational training in the schools in 1894.

In the light of the above one might well ask: Whilst we *do* have schools and universities now in society, what lies the way ahead?

THE REALITY OF A UNIVERSITY IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY

Since the university stands father to so many other educational institutions in society, only this focal point will now be considered.

The following are some of the realities about the university in a developing society:

1. The peoples from developing societies must realise that although education is a powerful force, in itself it is unable to bring about the desired changes for broad national development. Changes in the hearts and minds of people do not take place overnight. Those people who therefore claim that education is an adequate means of promoting the economic objectives either of an individual or of a nation are guilty of a gross oversimplification (cf. Moulder, 1980).

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2. It is a further reality that educational programmes and university training which are not complemented by real economic and social opportunities, lead in the long run to nothing but disillusion, misery and rebellion.

3. A university in a developing society must realise, now more than ever, that it is part and parcel of the society in which it finds itself. Such a university must play an educating role towards society; it must research the problems of that society and offer solutions to these problems. Although retaining its universal character, such a university must be especially marked by its particularity. A university in a developing world, says Vilakazi (1980), cannot afford to separate itself and be an ivory tower. The call of this university is to be down in the valley, in the struggle and sweat of everyday life, analysing and illuminating social reality. Leito (1980:371) concurs with this view where he says that: "De Universiteit volgens onze conceptie en behoefte is niet bestemd voor een ivoren toren hoog in de wolken doch dient temidden van de dagelijkse werkelijkheid te staan en moet het nodige doen om de geestelijke ontwikkeling van de bevolking, in al haar lagen, te bevorderen".

4. As sentry and as forerunner in society, this university should fulfil, according to Van Peursen (1967), to an increasing extent, a sort of radar function in a rapidly changing society. It should alert and educate the public on matters still to come. In this sense the university will then also fulfil its function as innovator and conservator of what is good and desirable.

5. In more specific terms, the university in a developing society must

- * first determine through its research programmes the particular manpower needs (even expressed in numbers if possible) and then train students to fill such positions. The emphasis must be on training for specific careers since students in a developing society can ill afford to attend a university for the sake of learning only. In this way it might be possible to guard against the problem of a surplus in manpower in years to come;
- * see to it that these trained students are ploughed back into society for the edification of their own people. They should be motivated to assist in bringing about an infrastructure that will create work opportunities for other people as well. Continuous feedback between trainee and training centre will therefore be absolutely essential;

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* investigate and try to solve such problems in society as cultural resistance to innovations; economic research into small farm systems and into crops and techniques generally appropriate for use on small farms (typical of the rural areas), in contrast to research geared at large farms; helping developing peoples to accept and to cope with new demands and contemporary problems of living; etc. (cf. Vilikazi, 1980). The people must be prepared for the problems and challenges of the new world. According to Havighurst & Levine (1979) Americans are now moving out of the industrial society into what they call the post-industrial society. Many peoples in developing societies are not even fully integrated into the industrial society; and

* in view of the above, arrange for extensive adult education programmes, not as a means to improve economic prosperity, but essentially to provide people with ideas, methods and habits of mind which would enable them to evaluate their society; to appreciate everything which makes their lives and the lives of others worth living; and to reject anything which dehumanises them and the other members of their society (Moulder, 1980).

CONCLUSION

A university in a developing society is an essential reality, marked not only by its universality but especially by its particularity. Since it is part and parcel of society, breathes the air of society, knows the needs as well as the aspirations of the members, it renders a service to society by trying to solve existing problems and at the same time making society aware of problems to come.

Should such a university be open to all in the South African sense of the word? Seen from its universal angle, the answer is yes, but never to such an extent that this openness affects its character; never to the extent that the particularity of its existence is threatened.

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