OUSL Journal (2007)
Vol. 4, (pp. 97-105)

Convocation Address III

Dhanarajan G

(Emeritus Professor, Wawasaan Education Foundation, Penang, Malaysia[1], 26 August 2004)

Open Universities - Agents of Change in Knowledge Societies

Let me begin by expressing my deepest appreciation to the Council, the Vice Chancellor, members of the Senate and the OUSL community for this singular honour to address this convocation of the University. At any time, the completion of a programme of studies by students demands dedication, determination and devotion, by those concerned. On top of this, to do so by the distance mode while maintaining life sustaining commitments at the same time, requires a great deal of self-sacrifice, a tremendous amount of perseverance, immense motivation and drive. I therefore want to salute all those who are graduating today on their accomplishments that we celebrate together on this happy occasion. You have earned our respect and admiration, you deserve the recognition being conferred on you and you must take pride in your achievements.

May I also, at the same time, pay tribute to the growing reputation of this University and the unique contribution it is making to higher education in this lovely country. I am naturally proud to be associated with it both as an honorary graduate belonging to an earlier graduating class, as well as in former capacity as a staff member of the Commonwealth of Learning.

The Open University of Sri Lanka has been a pioneer in the field of distance education and open learning, in Asia. You have gone through difficult times with the talented and gifted leadership and supporting academic community you have been able to successfully maintain your standing and service to this nation with great dedication and commitment. 1 offer you my congratulations, on your accomplishments as a centre for higher learning especially servicing those marginalized and deprived of learning opportunities earlier in their lives for one reason or another and wish you continued success in the years to come.

[1] 51 -23 Menara BHL, Jalan Sultan Ahmad Shah. 10050 Penang. Malaysia

I have always argued as many others before me, that education is a prerequisite not only for personal fulfillment but also for peace and harmony in the world. Education leads to a broadening of human understanding which should, in turn, contribute to greater tolerance, wider compassion, and an enhanced quality of life for mankind as well as the creation, development and application of knowledge in our societies; today, it is one of the major factors in economic development and is increasingly at the core of a country's competitive advantage in the global economy. But if you look around, you like me, will conclude that this does not seem to have happened, in many countries of the world. Why not? Indeed, while science and technology has produced tools and systems to improve agricultural productivity and modern medical research has brought improvements to and in public health, more people continue to suffer and die of under nourishment, ill health, agricultural systems are still vulnerable to vagaries of climatic and biological threats and some two billion people earn around or less than a dollar a day. One reason for the failure of big education to change our lives could be that it is available to far fewer people than it should. The limited access to education especially higher education has widened not narrowed the gaps in the quality of life between individuals as well as between nations. The unlucky, many of whom, have had no access to relevant and life-improving education always outnumbered the few who had benefited from learning. Higher education must be massified but massifying it to reach the many has been and continues to be wrought with tensions of one kind or another.

It is about tensions confronting educational providers that I wish to share some thoughts with you. These tensions are especially strong in the sector of education dealing with that we commonly refer to as Life long, Flexible and Continuing Education. These tensions are significantly the result of competing expectations of consumers of education, providers of education and governments which possess or demand a role but fail to understand or provide for the service. I am alluding to Education in communities such as yours where life long learning is becoming a necessity, as you strive for a richer, healthier and peaceful Sri Lanka.

Many of you, I am sure, follow international discussions and debate on Learning in a Globalised and Knowledge based societies. Whether these debates take place in academic conferences, business leaders meetings or Ministerial and international and intergovernmental gatherings four

ideas emerge as many times as the meetings themselves. These often are:

- A desire to create learning societies, by nation states, amongst their people, in order for them to be effective participants in a global village where economic production is increasingly dependent on the knowledge of their workforce.

- Life long learning to be an integral part of a nation's educational provision

- Educational curriculum to not only focus on mastery of content but also in processing, adapting, applying knowledge but more importantly creating new knowledge

- Education to instill fundamental values of indigenous societies and their traditions.

These are very high expectations and resonate well with the declarations that came out of UNESCO's World Conference on Higher Education for the 1st century. In it, UNESCO urged its member states to "establish, where appropriate the legislative political and financial framework for the reform and further development of higher education, in keeping with the terms of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which establishes that … no one can be excluded from higher education or its study fields … on grounds of race, gender, language, religion, or age or because of any economic or social distinctions or physical disabilities". The same document went even further to urge institutions of member states to "… include life long learning approaches, giving learners an optimal range of choice and a flexibility of entry and exit points within the system, and redefine their role accordingly, which implies the development of open and continuous access to higher learning …". Very few countries have created legislative environments to support this accord, despite the overwhelming support it received when mooted, except one that I know. In the Republic of Ireland, the Chair of the Higher Education Authority declared in 1999 "Policies for equality are amongst the most important policies of a university. Education is one of the most effective instruments available for addressing inequality and … Higher education has a key role". In demanding this, he was also resonating that country's Equal Status Act which makes it the responsibility of an educational establishment "not to discriminate in relation to neither the admission or the terms or conditions of admission of a person as a student to the establishment, nor the access of a student to any

course, facility or benefit provided by the establishment." While the Irish stand on the access issue is both laudable and welcome it is not as widespread as one would like it to be. Would it not be nice if Sri Lanka, with its achievement of universal literacy, so long ago, can lead the way in S. Asia?

Education, globally, has been slow in its movement towards providing greater access and flexibility, restructuring itself to operate diverse delivery mechanisms and respond to a variety of learning styles. This is evidenced by the fact that even today there are some 135 million children who do not have access to schools, most teenagers around the world have no more than basic education [because there aren't many opportunities for picking up learning after dropping off formal school], participation in post secondary education is available to less than 80 million young people across the world against a population base nearing half a billion [governments do not posses the necessary resources] and a large proportion of working adults who are illiterate, have little access to basic education and those who are lucky enough to experience basic, secondary and even post secondary education have almost no means of receiving continuing professional education or training [institutions shy away from innovations to their basic culture]. Despite this lack of opportunities and accommodation, the number of individuals coming out of school and aspiring to undertake post-secondary education continues to grow - there are more than one billion youths attending school today (less than 300 million 50 years ago). Many of them will continue look to and put pressure on, our institutions of higher education to provide them with advanced learning to live, work, compete in and contribute to their knowledge and/or learning societies. On the basis of present trends and growth less than a small proportion may get a chance to participate in this learning by the first quarter of this century. The others may have to seek employment for a living and at the same time seek learning opportunities to learn while earning. Many observers expect a more globalised world will increase and not decrease the demand for education, worldwide. There is sufficient empirical evidence to claim that the gap in the economic fortunes of those with and others without post secondary education is significantly large strengthening the belief that if a person wishes to be economically and socially successful an undergraduate degree is but a starting point. Extra mural and continuing education facilities of our universities have to confront this

challenge, because many in the work place may want to improve themselves.

It is in this environment of tremendous disparities and increasing demands at all levels of the educational sector that we need to examine the role of the Higher Education generally and life long, continuing and flexible education particularly and how they relate to each other within and out of their communities and countries. In doing so we may have to remind ourselves of four factors. They are:

1. First, the last ten years have witnessed the amazing transformation of social and economic lives with the arrival of new technologies. This has created a new interdependence between knowledge and economy activity. The rapid rate of change in the technology makes the obsolescence of knowledge faster than ever before. Between two and three years is now said to be the half-life of knowledge. This leads to fears that investment into research and development will not bring the anticipated dividend unless the investment is also made into the retraining of the workforce. The implication for continuing education and training within the workforce, therefore, becomes obvious. Furthermore, enterprises based on information technology are becoming typically smaller and, at the same time, expecting a very high degree of problem-solving and decision-making skills from employees. All of this requires continuous learning. Such enterprises are proving themselves highly capable of quickly transforming themselves to changing circumstances, thereby responding to market opportunities and threats. Another factor in these equations is the uncertainty of job security for the employee. At any moment a person can be out of a job; an unbroken career in the same establishment is a thing of the past. More than ever before, individual workers are under pressure to take their own initiative to maintain employability by adding to their knowledge, expertise and skill. The implications for continuing and lifelong education and training are therefore becoming obvious.

2. The second change is a clearer understanding of the global nature of economic competitiveness. Businesses and governments are asking themselves what they must do to achieve and maintain competitive advantage over their rivals. In this fight for survival one aspect that impacts on education and training is the nature of the workforce. There is generally a decline in the number of new entrants (with current knowledge and skills) into a workforce. This simply means that in order to maintain high levels of productivity as well as participation in the new knowledge-based work

environments, those already in the workforce must be retrained and re-skilled.

3. The third of these changes is ideological. Economic liberalism is being confirmed as a guiding light for government policies seeking economic development. In the rich countries it is challenging the way the state should make public services available to its citizens, and in the poorer countries the international financial institutions (IFI's) are ensuring the mantra is accepted before development assistance or loans are dispersed. As a consequence, education systems are being deregulated and educational institutions are being cast in the role of competitors for market share. Governments are telling educators that education is important and that more is needed, but not more of the same. New funding regimes are then introduced and new forms of accountability whose aim is to steer educational institutions towards greater efficiency are instituted. These have the immediate effect of changing the relationship between providers and users of the service. It also has the effect of changing the profile of the user as competition has a habit of chasing after new markets and therefore creating new products. From being a service available to only those in the 6 to 24 age cohort, it now becomes a service catering to the needs of lifelong learners and others outside of mainstream.

4. The last of these is the universal recognition that the best strategy to break the cycle of poverty and misery starts with education. Farmers with basic education are more productive than those with none; mothers with some education bring up healthier families than those without; workers with literacy and numeracy skills attract better wages than those without. The pressure on nations to enhance access to all levels of education arising out of these realisations has been on the increase over the last ten years and more.

All these means an unprecedented demand for and growth in the higher education, sector not only to serve the needs of those coming out of school between the 18 and 24 years age groups, but also those who will continue to return to study to keep up with changes in the work place. The World Bank estimates a growth rate of 8% in the low-income countries against a 4.5% rate for the higher income groups. Various other estimates seem to indicate that by the first quarter of the next century, there may be as many as 150 million individuals seeking

post-secondary education in colleges, polytechnics and universities, by the year 2020. Most of the demand will come from the present low-income countries as well as from other non-traditional sources. The regions where the demand will be most dramatic will be the same ones where the fiscal, physical and human infrastructure needed to meet the demand will be least developed. As many of you already know, closely at home, here in Sri Lanka, a recent study by the Asian Development Bank seems to indicate that the gap between demand for higher education and the supply of it is not shrinking but expanding in a very significant way. Alternate ways of bringing education to these marginalized communities have to be found both in Sri Lanka as well as many other countries around the world.

This is not going to be easy especially in economic terms. In 1994, it was estimated [perhaps not very accurately] less than 50 million individuals were served by between 16 and 20,000 post-secondary institutions at an annual cost of some US$1,200 billion. In 2004 some 80 million individuals are participating in higher education. According to one very wild estimate by Merrill Lynch, the total dollar value of education not just higher but all sectors of education is around USD 2 trillion, currently. We know from world experience that higher education generally consumes a major portion of any nation's education budget. Under such circumstances, it is very unlikely that public expenditure will rise proportionately with increase demands. Private participation including for-profit ventures is most likely to play a key role [if it is not already doing so] and the pressure to bring in private capital will intensify and with it the opening of the educational services market to global competition.

Until very recently education has generally been absent from debates regarding globalisation. DOHA despite its failure, managed to insert services in education on to the debate. UNESCO, which for a long time advocated against the commercialization of educational services now seems to be going through a change of heart - recent pronouncements by their senior managers seem to indicate that "commercialization was OK but not commoditization" [I am still trying to figure out the difference between the two].

The commercialization or commoditization of higher education raises a number of issues, not necessarily related to only the modes of service and delivery mechanisms but also at the national level the tolerable levels of the mix between private and public participation, the aims of the education sector in a nation's well being and the capacity of governments to provide educational services on a life long basis.

While the availability of indigenous private capital to underwrite education in the well to do OECD countries is plentiful, in most developing economies the capital has to be sourced outside. Aided by the communication technologies and cheaper costs universities of the western world have been increasing their physical presence through branch campuses, twinning arrangements, remote delivery and franchising in many parts of the world. You in Sri Lanka are already familiar with some of these types of ventures. These arrangements clearly are a break from the traditional identities of universities. Most often off shore arrangements stress vocational training and business development models over the traditional research-driven models. There is also constant fear in the academic community of releasing the monstrosity of "diploma mills" because of the narrow focus of these ventures, exchanging money for credentials seldom backed by quality instruction. There are other concerns as well including:

- the erosion of national or regulatory framework
- uncertainty over the recognition of academic credits and qualifications
- mismatch between curriculum and learner needs
- high cost of tuition creating a perception of two classes of students - those who are rich and can afford an off shore qualification and those who are not rich and suffer poorer quality indigenous supply
- erosion of standards and quality of learning support.

We are living through a time of changing expectations. Full fee paying students expect customer care interest and to be a priority in their institution's planning previously, institutions of education imposed requirements that their students were obliged to accept. Now, in a new order schools and colleges must respond to the differing expectations of more diverse student bodies, especially after primary education. From acting as the central determinant of their students' lives, institutions are now expected to adapt to the fact that many of their students expect them to fit around their lives.

Post-secondary education, in particular, is under enormous pressure to meet the needs of a diversity of learners, their learning context and

needs, since this sector of education is no longer the preserve of the 18 to 25 age group or of students solely engaged in full-time study. When an increasing number of students over the age of 25, make a late entry to higher education they are, therefore, more likely to be studying part-time. Their courses have to be organised so that they can study off-campus and many may indeed be enrolled in distance education programmes. The flexible nature of distance learning makes is what makes it possible for so many as this morning's graduands so readily will attest. Advances in communication technologies of the last decade and those expected to emerge over the next will further strengthen the call for our institutions to increase access beyond today's levels. Taken together, these changes raise fundamental questions for all institutions engaged in teaching and learning. Within education systems, there is a growing recognition that teaching and learning are not synonymous. A strong view, gradually gaining acceptance, is that a principal objective of education is to enable students to take charge of their own learning. Students should be empowered and enabled "to learn to learn," as forcefully expressed in the Delors Commission Report to UNESCO.

During the last ten years, these and similar issues have been the focus of much academic debate and public discussion. They continue to be. The arguments centre on how far our institutions, especially the post-secondary is, should preserve their traditions of teaching and how far they should acknowledge the changing nature of the world, including the character of learners and adapting to new circumstances. What is no longer in dispute is that post-secondary education must be more cost-effective and able to more with less in order to serve the interest of their communities, respond to the call of their governments and be relevant in a changing world. Open Universities have a tremendous role to play as agents and leaders in making a response to this call.

Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, members of the senate and the university community, new graduates, their families and friends the English essayist and poet said in the mid seventeenth century that "*Education is a companion which no misfortune can depress, no crime can destroy, no enemy can alienate, no despotism can enslave; at home, a friend, abroad, an introduction, in solitude a solace and in society an ornament. It chastens vice, it guides virtue, it gives at once grace and government to genius. without it, what is man? A splendid slave, a reasoning savage*". it is as true today as it was then. I wish all of you well.