World-class universities: a new holy grail

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Pakistan has plans for 'world-class' universities

For developing country universities to be 'world-class' they must be forward-looking and encourage an open environment, says *Pervez Hoodbhoy*.

Almost every country wants a 'world-class university', or claims to have at least one already.

Pakistan says it will establish nine in the next decade with help from Europe, and Qatar has imported local campuses of several well-known US universities to create an 'education city'. The director general of the Organization of Islam Countries has appealed for at least 20 of its member states' universities to be raised to 'world-class quality'. There are similarly ambitious programmes in China and India.

This is not surprising. Universities are the engines driving national growth in a world of fiercely competitive knowledge-based economies. But when can a university rightfully be called 'world-class'?

Some, like the University of Jammu in Kashmir and the MARA University of Technology in Malaysia, stake their claim on certification from the International Standards Organization (ISO) — a dubious proposal because ISO merely looks at the adequacy of procedural and management processes.

Newspapers and journals compile university rankings, such as the UK's Times Higher Education Supplement and a top-500 list compiled by China's Shanghai Jiao Tong University, but these rankings often differ sharply from one another.

Comparing different universities may be like comparing oranges and apples, but let us create for ourselves a yardstick for measurements — the hypothetical 'ideal university'.

The ideal university

This university is a bastion of critical inquiry covering every conceivable field of human endeavour. It has a first-rate faculty that does first-rate research on subjects like super-massive black holes and new extra-solar planets, quantum computation and the folding of proteins, the mating habits of macaws and tarantulas, and the extinct languages of Sumeria and Mesopotamia. Its professors are widely cited and known for important discoveries, their fame attracting talented researchers and students from across the world.

The ideal university spawns high-tech companies that create powerful computers and data compression techniques. It generates products and ideas upon which civilisations' progress and survival depend, such as new crop varieties and renewable energy sources. It also does a splendid job of training engineers, doctors, economists, business managers and other professionals.

Most importantly this ideal university creates a modern citizenry capable of responsible and reasoned decision making. Its graduates can think independently and scientifically, have an understanding of history and culture, can create discourses on social and political issues, and are capable of coherent expression in speech and writing. They are in demand everywhere, both in academia and industry, nationally and internationally.

A tall order indeed. Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge and Oxford are mere approximations to this high ideal. So how does one create something akin to this in a developing country? Money and resources are necessary, but they are not enough.

Facing the challenges

Faculty is the biggest challenge. Unless there is an attractive research environment, a university can end up with second-rate foreign academics looking for cushy jobs. And unless the national pre-university education system is strong and a good university entrance selection system exists, local students cannot benefit from high-quality teaching.

Pakistan's ambitious US$4.3 billion project to create nine Pakistani-European engineering universities with 50 per cent of the faculty and administrators from Europe is an example of how not to proceed.

The official opening of the first of these universities, in collaboration with a French consortium, is scheduled for October this year. But the situation on the ground is dismal. Because of Pakistan's dangerous security situation, the French are absent from the university — as of March 2007 not a single French faculty member had joined.

But even if the Europeans come, there are not enough Pakistani staff to teach at these universities. And given the crisis in science education in Pakistan, there are simply not enough well-prepared students to take advantage of the high-level university instruction.

Another difficulty universities face is ensuring academic freedom. A university cannot do meaningful research or teach history, art, politics and the social sciences unless authority and conventional wisdom can be challenged.

Still more important is freedom of cultural and personal expression. In many Islamic countries, films, drama and music are frowned upon and sometimes attacked by student vigilantes who believe these violate religious norms. As a professor at a Pakistani university, I have observed that

our female students, after being forced under the veil in recent years, have largely become timid, silent note-takers.

Ethical behaviour is also vital. Cheating in examinations, plagiarising research papers or projects and fabricating scientific data are enormously destructive of the institutional ethos — especially if insufficiently punished. In developing countries, national policies that give strong incentives for publications can end up creating a plagiarism pandemic.

Unlike hospitals or factories, well-functioning universities cannot be imported. They can only come from an organic, evolutionary process internal to a society. Being labelled 'world-class' is a nice token, but it is much more important for a university to have a forward-looking world view, an open environment, high ethical standards, a sense of collegiality and shared sense of purpose, and good governance practices.

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