

# Renovation and reconstruction of universities

The first and foremost responsibility of a university is to meet the needs of society

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Universities can be characterized in terms of three philosophical missions. British universities and their derivatives focus on the pursuit of truth, the development of intellectual capabilities and an atmosphere of profound academic freedom. Humboldt's university focuses on research and free exploration of truth, and their application. The Wisconsin model is based on service to society. Present-day universities, particularly in the developing world, should embrace all these concepts in their development and function. Major challenges to this objective include the brain drain, lack of funds, lack of tradition, and instability.

In addition to producing skilled professionals, universities should focus their academic programme and research initiatives on the needs of their own societies, advancing science and technology as part of the national developmental strategy at the same time as they conserve and promote their cultural and traditional heritages. Respected faculty, international student body, research of regional and global significance, service to the national development agenda: these are the cornerstones of a great university. A huge volume of resources, strong commitment and clear policies are required to mold and maintain high academic standards. A university should foster an exchange of ideas at all levels and incorporate a wide range of disciplines.

Autonomy, both academic and administrative, is another core feature of the university. Freedom from government and other social institutions will generate effective performance. Self-governance could be ensured by outstanding performance, regular evaluations, and upgrading of standards. Decentralized and transparent decision-making generates trust in the university and facilitates development of functions suitable to local needs. Coordination among different schools, departments and colleges is needed to achieve the goals of the university. In the developing countries, this might be a difficult proposition. However, appropriate governing laws and financial freedom may help improve the situations. Institutions such as university grant commissions and academies may serve as buffer or lubricating mechanisms. Accreditation associations, academic or professional societies and other types of associations could be additional mechanisms to monitor and maintain academic standards and academic autonomy. Allocation of development funds and scholarships from the government and international organizations will help strengthen the capacities of the universities.

Tolerance of critical thinking is essential. There should be no discriminations on any basis including differences of thinking and doctrines to pursue truth among and between academic and administrative professionals along with the students. The freedom to the faculty to conduct research, to teach and to publish promotes and ensures the quality of the individual institution and that of the system as a whole. Academic activities conducted in an easy, free and open environment are invariably seen to produce better results. However, we must not forget that excessive freedom may lead to the breakdown of discipline and order.

Development of an international standard university is a long-term process achieved through a strategic plan. Equally important is the understanding of the societies about its nature and functions. Students, faculty, and staff as well as government officials and citizens share equal responsibility. It is high time that we all focus our energy on this endeavor. ■

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Society's progress depends largely on the exploration and application of ideas. Worldwide, universities are the chief sources of these ideas. Lagging development is inevitably linked to poorly developed academic institutions. The problem is not just lack of adequate resources. Universities must be committed to the free exchange of ideas, tolerance of dissenting thought, incorporation of the widest possible range of disciplines, and a dedication to both personal growth and national service.