Guest Editor's Note:

Universities for the 21st century: new challenges for a changing world

Jamie Wallin, Ph.D.

Professor, Rangsit University, Thailand, and
Professor Emeritus, The University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada
E-mail: rsu.wallin@yahoo.ca

Available online 15 June 2015

_____

Many themes have been touched upon in this section 'Editor's Note' over the five volumes. In reviewing previous 'Notes' it is clear that most themes have implications, if not directly, certainly indirectly, to the role of universities in contemporary society.

Thus the theme chosen for this issue of the Rangsit Journal of Arts and Science is **universities.** Are universities meeting the present needs of their societies? Does the mission of universities need an overhaul? Specifically, why international analysts appear to be urging a serious re-examination of their mission.

But, first, a closer look at the meaning of 'defining institutional mission'. According to Philip Seznick, sociologist, and author of a seminal work on leadership commented:

> "In defining the mission of an organization, leaders must take account of (1) _the internal state of the polity:_ the internal strivings, inhibitions, and competences that exist within the organization; and (2) _the external expectations_ that determine what must be sought or achieved if the institution is to survive" (1957, pp. 67, 68).

What Selznick is pointing out is that any attempt to redefine an institution's mission needs to take into account the tension that he believes always exists between the actual capabilities of institutions, such as universities, and the needs of the societies which support them.

More recently, with respect to the mission of universities, the former president of the University of Michigan (USA), has stated "The primary activity of a university – learning, in all its forms, to better serve our world" (Duderstadt, 1994).

Reform. What reforms? What areas may be in need of reform? Several years ago, in the United Kingdom (UK), a 'Summit' was organized. It was entitled 'TIME Summit on Higher Education'.
Access. One of six broad recommendations focused on 'Access': "Expand access to undergraduate education by expanding student aid and by providing academic preparation for students." (Reinventing Our Universities in the 21st Century, 2013).

Implied in this recommendation are two issues: many worthy high school graduates cannot afford to enter universities due to lack of financial resources; and, some students have not been adequately prepared for academic studies.

This latter point, inadequate preparation, will not be a surprise to many people in South East Asia. In Thailand, for example, this poor quality of high school graduates was the subject of a recent editorial in the _Bangkok Post_:

> ". . . a large number of students who just graduated from secondary schools throughout Thailand are unprepared to go on. These young people were all certified by high school teachers and principals as ready for tertiary education. Indeed, they took the entrance exams because they have the ambition to

move to university . . . . (however) many could not get a passing grade in maths and physics . . . .". And,

"Because [there is] a lack of qualified graduates, industries plan to 'import' one million people to work in Thai factories" (Bangkok Post, February 2, 2015).

Quality. A second recommendation by the TIME Summit, headed 'Quality', reads as follows:

"Implement continuous innovation and quality improvement; reduce the bureaucratic nightmare university committees impose on faculties wishing to make changes ...."

Mention was made also of a previous UK report (Browne Report, 2011). That report recommended that universities needed to consult more closely with students about such matters as preferred course delivery options, and with employers about course relevancy (content) and internship opportunities.

A report from the United States (USA) presented nine conclusions, one of which was:
Employers report repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplace (Heller, 2009).

Rankings. Many national governments are becoming increasingly sensitive about the standing of their universities in comparison to other universities in their regions, as well as internationally. It has become a matter of national pride (Hazelkorn, 2009). Universities, themselves, also are concerned about their ranking in their own countries. Such rankings have been shown to influence student choice, and most certainly institutional decision-making. The system by which governments determine the amount of budgetary support to each university is also being affected in some countries.

Globalisation. According to the 2009 report commissioned by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), higher education has the responsibility of producing

"highly skilled workers . . . and (higher education) contributes to the research base and capacity for innovation that determine competitiveness in the knowledge-based global economy. It facilitates international collaboration and cross-cultural exchange. Cross-border flows of ideas, students, faculty and financing; . . .developments in information and communication technology are changing the environment where higher education institutions function. Cooperation and competition are intensifying simultaneously under the growing influence of market forces and the emergence of new players (OECD, 2009).

The OECD predicts an increase in private university education provision worldwide, as well as the use of performance-based and competitive allocation of public funds to universities.

The 2009 report goes on to say that with the establishment of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), it is anticipated that there will be an increase in student mobility, and of faculty, among member states. Such external forces are likely to have a profound impact on both public and private universities in free market countries such as Thailand and Indonesia.

China. The government of China, since the 1990s, has made investment in higher education a national priority. The focus is on increasing participation rates, and producing world-class research. According to a recent report, investment in research and development has received almost 20% annual growth since 2008. The government has established what is called the C9 League, a group of elite research-focused universities, 'envisioned as becoming an equivalent to the US Ivy League or UK Russell Group' (BRICS Top Universities, 2015).

Concluding Note. This has been a brief sketch of some of the forces and issues that now confront universities everywhere. A recent study reveals that 10 Asian universities are now in the top 100 of the world: (Mainland) China (2), Hong Kong (2), Japan (2), Republic of Korea (2), and Singapore (2),. Six of them are in the top 50.

University of Tokyo was ranked 23; National University of Singapore 25; University of Hong Kong 43; Peking University 48; Tsinghua University 49, and Seoul National University 50 (Times Higher Education, 2014).

One of the many challenges facing universities today will be how to increase their reputation for quality, not only within their own national borders but within their region. However, it would appear that high quality is correlated with high levels of autonomy. The top universities in Asia are unique in their ability to govern themselves: make key policies and decisions.

Concluding Questions. Can governments be persuaded to grant more autonomy to their universities? Can universities yield more decision authority to their faculty units? And, can faculties become more student-centered by providing more options both in the requirements for degree completion as well as in the delivery of courses, for example?

"The mission of higher education is learning in all of its form, to better serve our ever changing world".

The *Rangsit Journal of Arts and Science*s would welcome papers that contribute further to issues and developments in areas related to university governance and management, particularly in Asian countries.

References

Bangkok Post. (2015). *Get serious on education*. Editorial, 24/02/2015.
BRICS Top Universities. (2015). Chinese Universities in the 2014 QS University Rankings. Retrieved from
    www.topuniversities.com/university-rankings-articles/brics-rankings/chinese-univers...
Hazelkorn, E. (2009). Rankings and the Battle for World-Class Excellence: Institutional Strategies and
    Policy Choices. *Higher Education Management and Policy, 21*(1), Paris, France: OECD.
Heller, D. E. (2009). The Context of Higher Education Reform in the United States. *Higher Education
    Management and Policy, 21*(2), Paris, France: OECD.
Selznick, P. (1957) *Leadership in Administration*. New York, USA: Harper & Row.
TIME Summit on Higher Education. (2013). Retrieved on March 12, 2015 from
    www.nation.time.com/2013/09/20/reinventing-our-universities-in-the-21st-century/
Times Higher Education. (2015). *Academic Ranking of World Universities 2014 Results*, Retrieved from
    www.timeshighereducation.co.uk