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VSR&NVR College (Autonomous), Tenali - 522201.

Guntur Dt., Andhra Pradesh.

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**NATIONAL SEMINAR ON SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY
AND ETHICS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Organised by IQAC

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THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITIES IN THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETIES/ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

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Introduction

The four major functions of universities as applicable to all societies to a greater or lesser extent provide a suitable starting point for the analysis that follows. First, universities have historically played a major role as ideological apparatuses, expressing the ideological struggles present in all societies. Second, they have always been mechanisms of selection and socialisation of dominant elites. Third, the generation of knowledge, often seen as their most important function, is actually a relatively minor one, with functions of scientific research often assumed by specialised national institutes or within in-house laboratories of private firms. Fourth, the most traditional - and today the most frequently emphasised - function of universities is the training of a skilled labour force.

ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION:

Universities' roles in generating economic transformations are classically embraced by human capital theories of economic growth. However, while noting the 'global supremacy of the market concept' the economic role for the university was generally not elaborated in the case studies. Many of them assumed there was such a role without investigating it in any detail. Thus, the universities' roles in producing a professionally-educated class - the lawyers, businessmen and teachers etc - was duly noted, but we have little to tell us whether and how such production was transforming society. After all, such a role would have been played in previous regimes and contexts. Were universities now performing it in new ways? Had curricula been revised? Were different kinds of graduates being produced? And what was happening to them? In some cases, for example Bulgaria, the answer was partly in terms of large-scale emigration with higher education playing the role of an 'escape route' for individuals rather than a force for social and economic transformation.

A lack of data may be part of the problem here. Few of the participating countries appear to possess reliable statistics on graduate employment. Moreover, the impact of graduates in the labour market will be long term over forty years or so of working life. The existence of new kinds of graduates - with new skills and aspirations - may provide a potential for 'creeping transformation' in the long-term rather than visible change in the short-term. However, it may also be the case, at least in some countries, that essentially 'black market' or 'informal' economies had resulted in fewer opportunities for economic and social advancement through possession of educational qualifications than international models of the 'knowledge economy' would suggest.



SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

Political roles clearly interact with the social roles of universities, not least in respect of the part played in elite reproduction. A pre-condition of social transformation may be the provision of educational opportunities for previously disadvantaged groups to achieve elite or middle class positions. But we need to distinguish between changes that improve the prospects of specific groups over those of others and changes that affect the general structures of opportunity and inequality present in a society. Thus, while the former has clearly occurred in South Africa, the latter changes may not have taken place to any significant effect.

CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION

The role of universities in 'nation-building' has already been noted. Universities situated in capital cities in particular appear often to exert an important symbolic influence – providing opportunities for the celebration of national traditions. They can also serve as a socialising influence on elites to reinforce national values and loyalties. Universities in some countries have had an important role in providing a repository for national sentiments during long periods of foreign occupation or dominance. The preservation of a national language and the influences which universities can play on national school systems can also be noted in this respect.

Set alongside these differentiating functions of universities – whether in national or ethnic terms – are the universalising effects of international scholarship, opportunities to travel and the like. Universities have been important routes through which formerly closed societies have become open to the external world. This is certainly recognised within these countries and considerable attention is given to staff and student mobility schemes and support for multinational networks and agencies. Inevitably there often exists a tension between these internationalising influences and the desire to preserve and enhance national identity.

WHAT IS BEING TRANSFORMED IN HIGHER EDUCATION?

The transformation of universities themselves was not the principal focus of this project. But it is important insofar as institutional transformation is often seen as a pre-requisite for the university or its constituencies to perform new roles in society. A general message from the case studies is that, despite a general tendency towards the gradual domination of managerialism in the organisation of both teaching and research and the commercialisation of research and the outsourcing of many services, local and regional situations reveal persistent differences, both in terms of institutional management, curriculum, relations to the state, enrolments and patterns of participation, and academic careers. Beyond similar policy agendas, these realities signal contrasting histories and unequal states of development of higher education. These differences formed the basis of our discussions throughout the project.

In this section, the impact of both local pressures and wider regional and global changes on national higher education policies and institutions will be



examined. Four areas of impact, which in most cases resulted in profound transformations of systems and/or institutions, are given particular attention. They are: curriculum, quality and standards, (ii) the differentiation of higher education landscapes (regionalisation, privatisation), (iii) the student identity and experience, and (iv) academic responses to change.

TRANSFORMING SOCIETIES

The project attempted to distinguish between the economic, the political, the social and the cultural impact of universities in societies experiencing transformation. In general, and certainly in the short term, the role of universities in stimulating economic change appears to have been relatively weak. Here, we saw what was described as a 'disconnection of spheres' where the emergence of 'black economies' and private entrepreneurship had relatively little needed for formal qualifications. Indeed, for the individual graduate wanting to get some economic return on his or her higher education, 'escape' through emigration appears to have been 'the best' and a rather common solution. Yet here and elsewhere, economic goals were frequently driving higher education reforms which might be important in longer term social and economic transformation. In most countries it was also possible to find pockets of activity in higher education – sometimes in the private sector – that appeared to be having an immediate economic relevance. As far as its economic role was concerned, higher education was generally responding – with varying degrees of enthusiasm – to pressures from outside, partly the state but sometimes the labour market itself. In our study there was little or no evidence that the higher education sector was a major force in initiating or driving transformation.

The social role of the university in processes of transformation is also a mixed and complex phenomenon. In general, it could be argued that universities contribute as much to social reproduction as they do to social transformation. Differentiation may be important here with roles varying between public and private sectors, between institutions of different types and between capital city and regional institutions. South Africa provided the strongest example of social equity being high on the agenda of higher education with some impressive achievements as well as policy initiatives to report.

The cultural role of the university appears to have been important in many places. First, it had over the years provided at least a half open door for external ideas and experiences to enter into otherwise closed societies. Second, in some places it had provided something of a repository for national sentiments that could come out of 'storage' when the time and circumstances permitted. Third, there were tensions between the 'international' and the 'national' elements implicit in the first two points above and, for example, in the balance between social democratic and market driven forces. Of course, these are tensions existing throughout most of these societies. They can pose contradictions of identity and purpose within institutions as well as in the broader society.



The economic, political, social and cultural roles of the university are all connected. Also connected to the question of social transformation is the question of transforming the university itself.

Conclusion

In pursuing questions about the social role of universities, it is important that the claims of the academy are themselves challenged. Politicians and others may sometimes question the capacity of university-based researchers to mount such challenges. We, after all, have strong interests in the answers. This, in a sense, was the starting point for this project: to submit to critical empirical scrutiny some of the claims that were being made about the importance of universities in processes of social, political and economic transformation.

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