

Building Bridges across Diverse Cultures

Plenary Session: The Role of Universities in the 21st Century

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Choon Fong SHIH
President, National University of Singapore

Over the past two days, we have heard a lot about science and technology, and in particular, the university's role in relation to knowledge creation, innovation and technology transfer. In fact, the preceding speakers, the chairman of this plenary session, Richard Sykes, as well as Marye Anne Fox have spoken most eloquently on this subject. I also note that the two Ministers for Science and Technology on this panel will also be speaking on science and technology.

With science and technology so well covered, I would like to take the liberty to share my thoughts about another possible role for the 21st century university – that of building bridges across diverse cultures.

Science and Technology – A Double-edged Sword

In recent decades, we have made rapid and immense progress in terms of science and technology. Science has delivered great benefits to human society, contributing in countless tangible ways to making our lives better. At the same time, the headlong rush for science and technology – the drivers of economic growth – has brought problems upon us as well.

In shrinking the space between continents, cultures and civilizations, technology has pushed diverse peoples closer, sometimes making reluctant neighbors. Look for instance at the Internet – an instantaneous medium with a global reach. Information – text, sound and images – can be sent at the click of a mouse. So can disinformation. Like a double-edged sword, technology can amplify cultural differences and socio-cultural divides.

We now witness intensified conflicts on a global scale – congestion, clash of cultures, global terror and social turmoil – apart from the ever present competition for resources and conflict for the control of finite resources.

While clashes on a regional scale have been common throughout history, the increasing intensity as well as frequency of global conflicts may partly be attributable to our immense success in harnessing science and technology.

The conflicts may have come about because the pace of technological change far exceeds the pace of social and cultural adaptation.

Technology-Culture Divergence

Today, the pace of technological change is measured by years, and even by months.

By contrast socio-cultural change is measured by generations, if not centuries. During the Axial Age, great thinkers and founders of faith like Plato, Confucius and the Buddha set forth basic values and human ideals – like compassion, empathy and self-cultivation – that have shaped us till today. But this profound transformation took place some 2000 years ago!

The accelerating pace of technological change has far exceeded the evolution of our social and cultural DNA – our sense of empathy, identity and values. This technology-culture divergence is growing.

The University for the 21st Century

In a world such as this, what are universities to do? Universities cannot put the brakes on technological innovation – can we defy gravity? In fact, universities have a vital role in contributing to innovation. So what can universities do?

It is clear that science and technology by itself is not enough. Innovation alone cannot provide the solutions – there are strong ethical and cultural dimensions to many of the world's most pressing challenges. As a community of scholars, universities can bring knowledge and new ideas to address these issues, not only to improve material or economic wellbeing, but also to address matters of the spirit and soul. I believe that the role of universities in the 21st century needs to include building bridges across diverse cultures, to create platforms for dialogue across cultures.

More than ever before, a university for the 21st century needs to fulfill both a functional mission as well as a civilizing mission.

The university's functional mission relates to developing intellectual capital, which includes generating knowledge, harnessing science and technology as engines for innovation and economic growth. This functional mission focuses more on mastery of the physical world, and advancing material wellbeing.

The university's civilizing mission relates to developing character, including that of the global citizen, who is at ease with diverse cultures and able to bridge cultures and contribute to dialogue on global issues. This civilizing mission focuses more on mastering the self, and understanding self in relation to society.

Building Bridges across Continents, Cultures and Disciplines

Global alliances of universities can be a way to build bridges across continents, cultures and disciplines. Let me mention a few global networks in which the National University of Singapore (NUS) participates. One is the APRU World

Institute (AWI) which NUS hosts. AWI is an institute of advanced studies under the umbrella of the Association of Pacific Rim Universities (APRU), which is an alliance of 37 research-intensive universities across four continents around the Pacific Rim. AWI brings together top minds from around the world to engage in addressing issues of global significance.

Another global network is the International Alliance of Research Universities (IARU). IARU is an alliance of 10 research universities across four continents. Member universities share a vision and commitment to addressing scientific, socio-cultural, research and policy issues of global significance.

Dialogue across Cultures

Through multi-lateral alliances that transcend continental, disciplinary and cultural boundaries, the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. The synergies in these partnerships can be powerful forces for building mutual trust and respect across cultures, and for facilitating dialogue and understanding among diverse cultures and civilizations.

In the 21st century, the university must take the lead to nurture graduates who are able to go beyond mere tolerance to experiencing and celebrating the rich diversity of cultures the world has to offer.

Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate in Economics, has spoken about a common global civilization, one that recognizes the diverse identities as well as the inter-dependences of the world's civilizations. Material well being, which is the fruit of science, is not enough. The well-being of our minds and spirits, and our mutual relationships with each other, are also essential for humankind's survival.

Let me note in conclusion that more than any of the other disciplines, science has been the one that has opened up the last frontiers for humankind – whether in astronomy, physics, biology, psychology, and its various technological derivatives. This is not conceit. Ironically enough, as science has journeyed further and further out to examine and understand the external universe of matter, it has also started to journey inwards into the internal arena of neurology, where brain and mind come together. Why do we have emotions? How do we relate to friend and foe? Why do we have an urge for the spiritual and the meaningful? The last frontier, it now seems, is the scientific inquiry into what it is to be a human being. Or – to be more hopeful – what it means to become a more complete human being. This is likely the final frontier for the mission of a university.

I hope you share the view that leveraging science and technology, universities have a vital role in helping enhance dialogue across cultures, and even to shedding light on what it is to become more complete human beings, and in so doing contribute to building a common global civilization.