

Asian University Presidents' Forum (AUPF)

Keynote Address by Professor John Belcher, President, The Study Abroad Foundation

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The Internationalization of Universities

Communication Understanding and Change

President Yu, Members of the Asian University President's Forum, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to address you on this important occasion. I am pleased to return to Providence University and be in the company of colleagues from so many universities in the region known to me, and in many cases from universities I have visited.

Being the president of a university has become a challenging and demanding job. Only a couple of decades ago it was perhaps much less so. At that time student participation rates were lower, the number of eligible student applicants per place was higher, governments were less interventionist, often more generous and the idea of what constituted a good university education simpler and clearer. The world in which universities work has changed, and today universities are being called to respond in a myriad of different ways to the more complex environments in which they work. That environment has become an increasingly globalized one and one where the internationalization of universities is, shall we say, a "hot topic". The internationalization of universities is much spoken and written about to the point where it would be almost

indecent for a university president at least not to pay lip-service to the topic. Indeed the pressure is such that almost all enthusiastically support it. However, in the rush to embrace internationalism and amongst the pressures of university life generally the very idea of internationalization in higher education has come to mean many different things. Unfortunately the desirable development of more international perspectives in universities has become caught up with many other developments in higher education and resulted in a sort of trendiness: a careless pursuit of all new ideas without much depth of thought and purpose underlying it.

I can perhaps speak more frankly about developments in higher education and internationalization in particular as I am not a university president under pressure to “internationalize” their university. Although I have been the vice president of a very large university, the University of Westminster in London, I am now the President of a foundation, the Study Abroad Foundation - SAF, which has some 150 member universities in 9 countries, including I am pleased to say, in Mainland China, Taiwan, Japan and Korea. So, whilst I am not totally non-partisan, my remarks today will perhaps come from a fairly impartial perspective. I hope so.

A meeting such as this provides an opportunity to think about what is really happening in the universities you represent; to step back and to think more broadly and deeply about higher education. Today there are some 20,000 universities worldwide. An increasing number are in Asia. Some of the youngest populations in the world are in Asia, notably in Indonesia and Vietnam, and this drives university development and expansion. Also, some of the fastest aging populations are to be found in Asia where in some countries, notably Japan, there is a contraction in the number of universities and sometimes in the levels of enrolment at individual institutions.

Although the world has been globalizing on and off since time began, it is only in the late twentieth century did the process take on the speed and reach that we now consider distinguishes the end of the that century and the beginning of the twenty first century. The speed of communication has never been faster.

Communication has become easier and relatively low cost enabling more and more of the world's globalized people to in some way participate in a world larger and more complex than the world in which they had hitherto been living. Education has also a long history of internationalization in response to globalization, in fact one might argue that the essence of education is universal knowledge and therefore education is the most enduring force for internationalization. True internationalization goes well beyond attracting foreign students, sending students abroad, staff mobility and joint research and must focus on the essential purpose of university education. Only this way will the importance of universities in society grow. I have taken as my sub-theme: Communication, Understanding and Change. But before we explore this theme let us return to the circumstances in which your universities in Asia work today.

I believe that today, especially in Asia where the pace of change generally is very fast, that universities as diverse as mass teaching institutions to specialized research universities spend too much time considering their futures and trying to apply this to the present. Indeed I would argue they somehow have become caught-up in a sort of futuristic conspiracy – an unthinking and uncoordinated one – where they utter many platitudes about globalization, global knowledge and the role of universities in this context. I am afraid this is not a question of universities leading a debate, but a process whereby they follow ill-defined trends. It is almost impossible to find a university mission statement that does not tell us that the particular university is at the forefront of globalization, has fully embraced the communications revolution and is in the business of internationalizing and preparing global citizens for a global future. Much of this rhetoric does not stand up well to analysis. However, this does not prevent its proliferation. I believe there is a need for reappraisal, which requires a better understanding of the origins of your universities, many of which were founded in the early twentieth century and a good number after the Second World War.

Until relatively recently Japan was the only industrialized or developed country in Asia. When I first visited Asia in the late 1970s even when visiting Korea and Taiwan one was essentially visiting the developing world or Third World as we then often called it. The region's universities were certainly not even close to

where they are today in terms of their quality and international competitiveness, but one could sense that they were playing a very important role in national and regional development, indeed there is hard evidence in this regard. And when I say universities were advancing development, I do not simply mean economic growth, but overall socio-economic development of the type many countries find elusive. In the 1970s Taiwan's and Korea's national universities were clearly emerging powerhouses of science and technology and Korea's exceptionally strong private universities were places of emerging distinction. It was the private universities in Asia that particularly engaged my interest, as they tended to be very far-sighted and distinctive. Indeed they had what they often described as "university spirit" and a sense of purpose I had not seen so clearly in Europe. Often founded by visionary individuals or groups with a sense of educational, moral and internationalist purpose these universities were not so focused on the development of a country but of individuals, of young people. Often religious groups had founded these universities, although in an increasingly secular society their influence was beginning to wane. Today, the same institutions as I visited in the 1970s and 1980s are thriving and many of the countries represented here today benefit from the diversity afforded by some of the strongest mixed public and private university sectors in the world. However, I would question whether their "spirit" is thriving in the same way as their founders or some more informed post Second World War governments envisioned. They have well-educated faculty, excellent facilities and lots of students, but they do seem to have become somewhat homogeneous and less concerned to effect change in their societies in this more globalized era. Of course they are all busy "internationalizing", and in different ways are at the forefront in the development and use of information and communications technology.

Let us return to the theme of this address, the Internationalization of Universities ~ Communication, Understanding and Change. Global communication is for many of students in the world's rich countries quite commonplace. Universities encourage it. Indeed many claim to be preparing their students to benefit from it personally and contribute to the human condition by being good at intercultural communication. Think of blogging – ten years old this year. Today there is an estimated 70 million blogs in existence, with up to 1.5

million posts written every day. Andrew Keen, a former dotcom entrepreneur and the author of Cult of the Amateur: How the Internet is Killing Our Culture, says of blogging “It’s seductive in the sense that it convinces people to think they have more to say and are more interesting than they really are”. “The real issue is whether [blogging] adds anymore to our culture. Most of it is just ... transient and ephemeral”. This is not to say that blogging or other forms of mass participation communication facilitated by the internet are without value, much depends on content how they are used. Clearly for the significant minorities blogging in politically repressive counties, some of which are not far from here, the activity is often of real substance, importance and potential. It must be because it can get you a prison sentence for practicing what is protected by The Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It’s clearly not communication itself, but what is communicated, what is understood and the impact of what is understood on behavior that is important.

Universities also encourage their students to communicate directly through travel and to learn from spending time studying, working and volunteering abroad. The Foundation I lead encourages this by encouraging and facilitating international undergraduate mobility. For students in some countries these experiences have become a rite of passage. For example every year 200,000 young people take a “gap year” off to travel between leaving school and going to university. Organizing travel, running day-to-day finances, and coping with foreign cultures can be a good preparation for adulthood and might even contribute to international understanding. But this is not axiomatic any more than sitting in a library surrounded by books alone will result in the acquisition of knowledge. Student travel experience is often little more than an extended vacation with people of similar backgrounds spending time in each others company in well-trodden places whilst keeping the folks back home informed of developments via text messages. Real exposure to new cultures or even people who are not just seeking to part them from their money can be rare.

What is happening is communication without meaningful context and this results in communication without substance. This is happening because some parts of what universities do is without a well-thought out

rationale and most certainly lacking in the spirit of the type that fostered the early strengths of modern higher education in this region. To say higher education in the region has lost its way is not an exaggeration. Perhaps it is more apparent in Asia because of the region's rapid economic growth and at times its disconnection from overall development and a tendency to copy developments in higher education elsewhere. I suggest what has happened is that higher education has been commoditized. This is a serious and deep-rooted problem.

Immediately after 9/11 President Bush addressed his nation. Here was a chance to bring people together and to share a vision of what to do to create a better and more secure future for them in a more united world. Instead President Bush asked Americans to do what Americans do lots of already ...to shop. The mayor of New York made a similar appeal. The objective was to keep the consumer economy robust. At the time in the atmosphere of shock this call to revert to normality went somewhat unnoticed. In his recent book Consumed, Benjamin Barber argues shopping is the only common purpose Americans have left. For two generations consumerism and citizenship have been battling it out. And consumerism has won.

In response to demand, largely driven by the experience of students and their families in rich consumer-driven societies, universities are conspiring to compound and prolong a situation that is not only discordant with one of the key purposes of education: the search for truth, but also does not accord with the spirit in which many of this regions finest universities were founded and developed. Universities have traditionally been looked to for leadership. What I am describing is universities and their students being led by circumstances and forces they choose to ignore. These developments are worrying. They are also potentially dangerous.

The criticism of the West by some of the most despicable people on earth – fundamentalist terrorists who would not hesitate to murder many if not all of us in this room if they felt it helped their cause - is not without foundation. Indeed many of these people are educated in the counties they most despise, some we know

attended leading universities in the United States and elsewhere where they experienced life in societies that to them had lost their way and had no moral purpose. Interestingly many of these people pursued what we often describe as professional programs in science, technology and business. Few appear to have received what we might regard as a well-rounded education. Their perverse solution to the maladies of life in a globalized era wins little support from most people; the majority of which live in underdeveloped countries and suffer social injustice. But elements of the core analysis of even fundamentalist terrorists resonates and often makes sense to many people.

Perhaps you are beginning to better understand my concern for higher education in Asia and to see that this concern does not arise from some temporary problem soon to be overcome, but to a more universal decline in leadership by universities. Perhaps also you will see how this concern relates to the theme of my address: The Internationalization of Universities. What then needs to be done if universities are to resume their important leadership role in a globalized world? Finding an answer is made easier if we take a historical perspective and look back and learn from past achievement. Globalization itself is most certainly not internationalization and globalization is even less likely to lead to international understanding unless the values underpinning these developments are such that they foster international understanding. This is where universities busy “internationalizing” have a tremendous responsibility. And in a way Asian universities have a particular responsibility arising from their rapid development, the huge numbers of students involved and the way in which they have contributed to the growth and development of the region. Asian universities must now find ways to contribute to international society, especially the most disadvantaged parts of that society. For example Korea is today the world’s 11th largest economy and an increasingly influential society, but its contribution to international development is disproportionately low.

In many parts of Asia the “economic miracles” of the past two generations have been fueled, in large part, by an educational system which was mandated to train, on a grand scale, the nation’s manpower to compete in an increasingly globalized economy. But while many Asian countries are transforming into

industrialized economies, other major world economies, already industrialized, were expanding beyond their own borders. Spurred by the opening of global markets, the emergence of international standards, and improving technology, these countries ascended to new levels of competitiveness and prosperity. At the level of research Asian universities have significant challenges ahead. But when it comes to undergraduate education there is a risk that the response of universities to these circumstances will be to provide what their consumers seem to want: not particularly challenging professional education with a global flavor.

As Asian universities seek a way to remain relevant and to occupy a leadership role in their societies, I believe they should seek to assert a new “spirit” which insists that education, which is not delivered within a framework of ethics, is incomplete. Knowledge and skills alone are not a sound basis from which to develop informed, moral and compassionate societies for sustainable and peaceful human development. Asian universities must be at their core *Liberal Humanitarian Universities*. This must be manifested in breadth of knowledge and overall character development alongside academic specialization. Close staff-student relations facilitate this type of higher education and result in a strong sense of purpose among students. Universities should ensure that they have a strong liberal arts undergraduate curriculum to complement the work of burgeoning professional schools.

Commitment to liberal arts education will produce students with the leadership, problem-solving and communication skills essential to shape a globalized world. This surely is the best source of internationalization. This surely is an opportunity for Asian universities to reassert the spirit of innovative liberal education, which was often an essential component of the philosophies shaping their earliest years, and to do so in a new and relevant way. Asian Universities should once again become leaders of social development.

The age of globalization has seen the rise of neo-nationalism, religious fundamentalism and a resurgence of racial and ethnic tensions. The stable and peaceful era anticipated following the end of the Cold War has

not materialized. Although there has been success: Northern Ireland, East Timor and perhaps the Balkans and Kashmir. Democratization, international understanding and peace has been elusive. Indeed it is has been in Asia that some of the bloodiest and most intractable conflicts since the second world war have occurred, and in Asia where some of the most repressive governments retain power and some of the worse violations of human rights occur. As Asian countries respond to the increasingly globalized expectations of their citizens their universities have a critical role to play. That role surely is not to mimic the ways of Western universities, but to develop in ways relevant to their own traditions and circumstances. However, in so doing there are some inescapable facts of university history and elements contemporary international debate about the future of higher education, which are inescapable.

In 2002 the American Association of Colleges and Universities made an urgent appeal for the reform of US colleges, so they promoted the type of learning students need in order to meet the challenges of a globalized world. The report, Greater Expectations: The Commitment to Quality as a Nation Goes to College singled out a practical liberal education as being the most empowering. This type of liberal education can take different forms, but the key components are critical thinking, moral and social responsibility, history, breadth of knowledge, active rigorous inquiry, problem-solving and open-mindedness. To quote the AACU report: "The ability to think, to learn and to express oneself both rigorously and creatively, the capacity to understand ideas and issues in context, the commitment to live in society, and the yearning for truth are fundamental features of our humanity. In centering education on these qualities, liberal learning is society's best investment in our shared future".

Unfortunately even in the USA only around 10% of students receive this type of education, with far more students receiving specialized and vocational training, which we perhaps wrongly refer to as education.

The liberal arts tradition is in many ways European and North American insofar as universities have developed curricula to provide such education. But it is a tradition that has earlier more diverse origins and

one which has outgrown its more recent Western manifestations. Also, because liberal arts education is pluralistic it is able to flourish anywhere. Many of the universities represented here today have strong historic associations with liberal arts education. If they are to develop in the true sense of universities whilst embracing their new globalized environment and therefore effectively managing their internationalization Asian universities will find new avenues to explore and new opportunities to take. This requires leadership that really leads and defines educational purpose, rather than unthinkingly, or at worse slavishly, follows ill-defined trends including "internationalization". Asian universities have the accumulated wisdom and potential to find a future for their students in which they are able to shape their globalized world so that international understanding and peace has a better chance of being realized. I leave you with this clear challenge.

Thank you.