

Agent of change needs a revolution

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Comment

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PEOPLE walking along the cobbled streets of Paris towards the Unesco building last week where the World Conference on Higher Education was held were halted by a stream of at least 200 people on roller-skates and Rollerblades. The busy traffic along those congested streets was also disrupted.

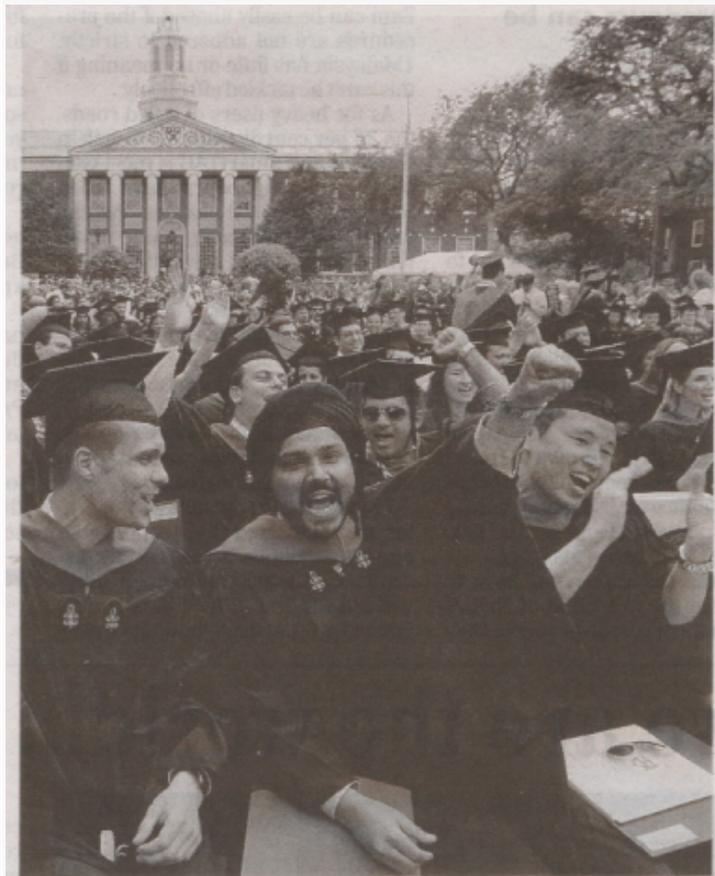
This stream of mobile people on the streets of Paris was rather symbolic of the "new dynamics" that mirrored the four-day Unesco conference, themed "The New Dynamics of Higher Education and Research for Societal Change and Development".

When the conference was first held in 1998, many did not foresee the transformational changes that higher education would be going through.

In terms of enrolment alone, the number has increased 10-fold from about 10 million in 1998 to more than 100 million today.

There are many factors that would have clearly indicated that the changes were not just about smoothing the rough edges.

The roller-skates and Roller-blades on the Paris streets are by comparison enjoying a smooth ride. In fact, it is more of a roller-coaster ride with its ups and down, the uncertain direction higher education is taking.



Harvard Business School's graduating class of 2009. In affluent United States, many have no access to higher education. — Reuters picture

A ride that not only moves faster but is equally able to cope with the leaps and bounds experienced by the higher education sector in the face of future uncertainties.

The search for societal change and development is far from settled as higher education itself becomes crowded and complex.

The question remains: which or what societal change and development?

This is what the conference was grappling with, and there is no easy or clear answer. What seems certain is

that today's model of higher education is undergoing an "academic revolution" of sorts.

Fundamental to this is the importance of academic freedom and autonomy where higher education should be allowed to be bold enough to shape the future.

To remain relevant, higher education must first transform itself on a scale and speed that would surpass that of the global market-place.

Otherwise, higher education will continue to dance to the tune set by those with vested interests that has led to a number of false dawns as a result of unfulfilled promises for the badly needed change, if not transformation.

Nowhere is this more true than in the developing countries and, in particular, the continent of Africa.

Africa continues to bleed intellectually, with about one-third of its scientists said to be in developed countries.

It follows the issues of equity and access, coupled with the privatisation of "public education.

At the same time, institutional "dumping" has become a quick way out for the sake of an international recognition plagued with numerous double standards and ambiguity.

It goes without saying that education increasingly suffers from the crisis of value, especially in the context of uplifting the human condition as spelt out in the various global initiatives under the auspices of the United Nations.

Even in an affluent United States, the issue of access and equity still remains unresolved, and the situation is worsening.

It was brought to the conference's attention that the US is nearing a "tipping point" in terms of the disparity of attainment across the different groups in the so-called melting pot of a nation!

Similarly, it was reported that in Australia, participation of the low socio-economic group in education was far too low, and worse, were statistics for university level.

Here is where the argument for social responsibility on the part of higher education is most convincing.

Society has given new responsibilities to universities with high expectations, which cannot be dismissed any more, as the quality of life of the people declines swiftly, no thanks to crisis after crisis, hitting especially the lowest strata of the population.

In other words, education is no longer just about personal or myopic development alone based on individualistic wants bordering on greed and selfishness.

Instead, higher education must be about creating the new dynamics that will ignite a change for a more global and sustainable future for all people.

These dynamics have been staring at our faces for quite some time now but we are still too busy replicating what we regard as the dominant educational systems of yesterday that have become largely dysfunctional in fulfilling the social mandate and expectations.

In the final analysis, if universities are able to take care of their future and manage their dynamics in a uniquely new way, then there is no reason they cannot be relied upon to shape the future of communities, let alone of nations, and the world at large.

What good is a university if it is not an agent of change for the future?

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