

Opportunities and Challenges of the University: Presidents Meet at Peking University

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May 4th, 1998 marked the centennial of Peking University. As part of the celebration, the university hosted an international forum entitled "Higher Education for the 21st Century." In attendance were 94 university presidents and representatives from 92 renowned universities in over 20 countries worldwide—including Oxford University, Harvard University, Stanford University, Moscow University, Melbourne University, Tokyo University, Taiwan University, and Hong Kong University, to name only a few.

The forum had four themes: 1) missions and roles of the university of the 21st century, 2) teaching and learning for the 21st century, 3) university-society relationships in the 21st century, and 4) university administration and finance for the 21st century. All speakers agreed that, with the emergence of a global knowledge-based economy, the university is taking on an ever more important role in the world. As an "engine" of social development, the university has contributed greatly to the transmission, processing, dissemination, application, and creation of knowledge. Having moved from the margins to the inner ring of society, the university has been very active in the training of high-quality students, the advancement of scientific research, and the overall development of society.

The speakers also pointed out that in the face of the new opportunities and challenges of the information age, the university needs to develop new strategies in teaching and learning. The traditional teacher/textbook/classroom-centered education needs to give way to a more open education that is available to a broader student body, with modern technology as a pedagogical tool. While encouraging students to learn independently with the help of the Internet and multimedia equipment, the speakers cautioned, educators should also provide opportunities to students for the interpersonal interaction that is vital for the fostering of humanistic values and moral development.

During the forum, the relationship between the university and society was a central topic among the

university presidents. While exploring ways for the university to serve the needs of society, all the speakers emphasized the necessity of ensuring autonomy and independence for the university. Only in this way could the university carry on basic research, teaching, and other activities aimed at seeking the truth that may not have immediate use for society but are indispensable in the long run.

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In the area of university administration and finance, the speakers also provided many insights and suggestions for improvement. To face the challenges of the new era, the university needs to streamline its internal structure so that its management can become more efficient and effective. The relationship between teaching and research should be adequately balanced, and universities should share resources. To increase funding for the university, government should increase its investment while implementing cost-sharing and cost-recovery policies as well as mobilizing funds from all sectors of society.

In sum, the speakers concluded, as it enters the new century, the university is facing many opportunities and challenges. To survive and prosper in changing times, the university should make special efforts to preserve its cultural heritage while promoting the internationalization of higher education worldwide. In this global endeavor, understanding and cooperation among universities is essential. ■

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