

47

Role of the University

Nobuhito Hobo

Being invited to attend the Convocation of a university is always pleasing and it is encouraging seeing so many young students and other academics being awarded the degrees on completion of their courses of study. I thank the Vice Chancellor Dr. Karunaratna for inviting me to the 40th Convocation of the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

First, I would like to congratulate all the graduates for successfully completing their courses of study and wish them all the very best in their future. I know how happy you feel today, as I recall the day of my own graduation from the Faculty of Agriculture at the University of Hokkaido in 1975. It is indeed one of the most important moments in one's life; to arrive at a decisive crossroad that will be the launching pad for your future career. From here on, you have to forge ahead and build your future career. So, I encourage you to face the future with confidence and be a winner not only for yourself but also for your country.

On this special occasion of your convocation, I would like to share with you some thoughts about general expectations from universities and a brief outline on university education in Japan.

Universities are the highest seats of learning in a country. They constitute a nerve centre of knowledge and intellectual life. The preamble of the Constitution of the International Association of Universities (IAU) states that universities have a 'high responsibility as guardians of the intellectual life' and they stand for certain fundamental principles, such as "the right to pursue knowledge for its own sake and to follow wherever the search for truth may lead and the tolerance of divergent opinion and freedom from political interference". Furthermore, the preamble also evokes 'their obligation as social institutions to promote, through teaching and research, the principles of freedom and justice, of human dignity and solidarity' and to 'develop material and moral aid on an international level'. Another core mission of the university is the transmission of knowledge. Transmission of knowledge has always been its generic task and the purposeful search for new knowledge through research has been its primary task.

One may ask therefore, whether these principles are adhered to by universities today and whether our universities are indeed the knowledge and intellectual hub of the nation. As guardians of the intellectual life and knowledge, universities ought to foster an unquenchable thirst among its students for knowledge, which can only be acquired through purposeful research in various fields. Nobel Prize winners as you know do not fall from the skies. Nobel laureates emerge from among the student body of these higher seats of learning and are the intellectual luminaries whose thirst for knowledge has led them to discover hidden truths of the universe. I am happy to say that Japan is proud to have many intellectual luminaries who were awarded Nobel prizes. In 1949, Yukawa Hideki became the first

Japanese Nobel laureate, winning a physics prize for predicting the existence of elementary particles. He was followed by Leo Esaki with a physics prize in 1973, Tonegawa Susumu a prize for physiology or medicine in 1987, and Kenzaburo Oe a literature prize in 1994. More recently, Japanese have won Nobel prizes one after another in the natural science area. In 2002, Masatoshi Koshihara of the University of Tokyo won a physics prize, Akira Suzuki of Hokkaido University and Eiichi Negishi of the University of Tokyo chemistry prizes in 2010, and Shinya Yamanaka of Kyoto University a prize for physiology or medicine in 2012 for the development of the iPS cell. In 2008 and 2010 alone, a total of six Japanese were awarded physics and chemistry prizes, the highest honor for natural scientists, highlighting Japan aiming at becoming a world leader in science and technology.

Now let me share with you some general information about the University system in Japan. In Japan, higher education starts upon completion of a total of 12 years of primary education (6 years in elementary school) and secondary education (three years respectively in both lower and upper secondary schools). Japanese higher education institutions include universities awarding Bachelor's, Master's, Doctor's and Professional Degrees, junior colleges awarding Associate's degree, and colleges of technology, where lower secondary school graduates are admitted and receive practical and creative training throughout a five-year period, and specialized training colleges (specialized schools) which offer specialized courses for the purpose of developing professional or practical abilities. In Japan, universities are divided into three categories by its founding basis: Firstly there are the national universities, which were established by the Japanese Government, public universities which are established by local public entities and private universities, which are established by educational corporations. National universities serve as key organizations targeting the improvement and well-balanced development of Japanese higher education. Public universities play important roles in providing higher education opportunities to local people and as intellectual and cultural centers in the local community. Private universities account for about 73% of all universities and about 73% of all university students enrollment and each private university promotes its own unique education and research activities based on the spiritual legacy of its foundation.

Japan's universities have contributed significantly, through the period of modernization since the Meiji era, and also the period of economic growth after the Second World War, to the areas of human resources training, the formation of a knowledge base, and the development and growth of the social economy. During these times, universities, regardless of whether they were national, public or private, were based on a shared awareness of the role and function expected of them. Against this background, the universities of today are expected to respond proactively to the diversification of the needs of both students and society, while at the same time guaranteeing and improving the quality of their education. Universities are required to provide a sufficient response to the demands of society from the perspective of assuring and improving the quality of education, but also to ensure that they communicate proactively to the wider world.

Today, where both internationalization and computerisation continue to move forward, the role of universities within society as centres for fostering human resources, preserving and developing science and culture, and contributing to local communities and industries is growing more and more significant. In addition to this, in reflection of the current situation both in Japan and overseas, the social role of

universities is growing ever larger. Within international society, developments in the integration of the Asian regional economy and severing economic competition in line with globalisation, along with global environmental problems and issues with food and energy supply, medical care and health, are creating problems for humankind as a whole. Against this background, Japan believes that that university education can play a significant role in training leaders for a new age, and equipping people with the knowledge and skills to succeed extensively as structural changes take place within society.

Universities cannot and must not exist in isolation. They must establish a network of intellectual associations with other universities both local as well as global. In this regard I am happy to note, for example, the establishment of the Sri Lanka-Japan Study Centre at the University of Peradeniya linking all other local universities in a joint programme with a view to encouraging collaborative research. International research collaboration is a rapidly growing component of core research activity in universities all over the world, as it provides access to a wider range of facilities and resources while enabling researchers to participate in networks of cutting-edge and innovative activity. It also provides knowledge of other research systems and contributes to building strategic partnerships.

Japan has always encouraged international students to come to Japan and pursue their studies in its universities too. With that in mind, Japan provides the government scholarships every year to international students. Already many Sri Lankans have been awarded this scholarship and graduated from Japanese universities. Some of the professors and academics in Sri Lankan universities are Japanese graduates. There is also the Japanese Graduates Alumni Association of Sri Lanka known as JAGAAS. Furthermore, Japan has invited many university students under various student exchange programmes. Several of your own students were invited on two occasions to participate in the JENESYS student invitation programme in Japan and I am sure they have benefitted immensely from that programme too. Apart from these, Japan has also initiated a Master's Degree programme for Sri Lankan Public Service Officers and Foreign Service officers known as "Young Leaders' Program (YLP)" administered by the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) with the Japanese Government Scholarship. The Embassy of Japan in Sri Lanka maintains very close relations with all universities the country and provides opportunities for student and academic exchange programmes. That is why I accepted your invitation to attend your convocation today. I hope we could continue this association in the future too.

I am very much impressed by what I have heard about the Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce as being one of the largest faculty in the national university system in Sri Lanka numbering over 5,000 internal students. Going by your excellent records of performance I hope that your university will also produce brilliant luminaries for your country in the near future. Who knows, maybe some of you present here may be future Nobel Prize winners too. And I certainly hope and wish that this would come true.

In conclusion, I would like to leave you with a quotation from the famous Indian Poet Rabindranath Tagore who said "The highest education is that which does not merely give us information but makes our life in harmony with all existence." May you find that harmony in life as you forge ahead towards a bright future.

Thank you.

2014.09.24