WHAT IS THE IDEA OF A UNIVERSITY?

Is James Cook really a University?

I believe that every member of the University should be constantly concerned with the question "Am I fulfilling my purpose as an individual in a University" and more particularly "Am I helping to make James Cook a valued University".

My observations are my own and each one should be prefixed by such phrases as "In my opinion that .... " or " It is my interpretation of the situation that .... ". Therefore, would you please assume these phrases and feel free to challenge on the basis of your own weighed experiences?

What is a University or what is the idea of a University? Is there any unambiguous never-changing answer to these questions? I suspect not because we serve a constantly changing society, but in the simplest case could we say that idealistically "a University is a collection of scholars involved in pursuits of exchange of ideas and of scholarly research, being devoted to the preservation and transmission of existing knowledge and the establishment of new knowledge for the betterment of mankind". The traditional triad of teaching, research and service.

From this idealistic approach we must now move dramatically and almost diametrically to the practical functions of a University.

Although I am not trying to impress on you the value of the metrication system, it would seem that ten major functions can be distinguished - not necessarily in order of priority, but I wonder how these would stand in your minds.

1. To provide professional and occupational training - in this the Universities prepare young people for an increasing range of professions and vocations.

2. To be responsible for the discovery of new knowledge. In Australian developmental research the Universities would stand out as the most significant contributors to new knowledge and the significance of University-based research in its application to the nation's economy and welfare is one of the great but unappreciated bargains that the Australian taxpayer receives from the use of his tax in supporting tertiary education.

3. To be Custodians of our cultural heritage, to maintain, and constantly devise improved methods for, the enormous and increasing store of humanistic and scientific knowledge which mankind possesses. Without this function, we would constantly be engaged in the wasteful process of rediscovering old knowledge.

4. To provide students with a liberal education - this term "liberal education" is a term often bandied around but seldom defined. But one of the definitions I would favour is "to allow the gaining of a
basic knowledge of man, his societies, and his physical world, to allow such mastery of the language and mathematical skills, to reason and express thought clearly and logically, to allow the gaining of desirable habits of mind such as the capacity to think clearly and to develop intellectual curiosity, and to weigh evidence objectively.

5. To act as a real means of providing access to a more desirable class of society. Any person of sufficient ambition and ability can graduate through University education to a society level associated with the professions.

6. To provide a pool of qualified talent representing a wide variety of training, and available to the community, Government and industry in an advisory capacity.

7. To serve as a "waiting station". This one may be challengeable, but I think it becomes more significant each year. In this regard University education serves as a form of occupation for youth during the transitional period from uncertainty to definiteness of purpose, from adolescence to adulthood.

Many young people are at University simply because there is no acceptable alternative in employment or occupation.

8. To be responsible for an impartial criticism of the existing society. Armed with the resources of the accumulated knowledge of man and his societies, the University personnel is in a position to exercise a sense of perspective about ourselves and our current social attitudes.

9. To offer educational opportunities to people of mature age. This aspect, at present not in high demand or favour, is one that will likely grow extensively in connection with the tenth function.

10. To offer remedial and renewal training, remedial to students from other countries and renewal in the form of summer courses or extension courses, for people in industry or external agencies who feel the need for refresher courses, taking into account the rapid advance of knowledge.

These are, as I see, the major functions of the existing University.

Are they what we want in our concept of a University? It is interesting to note that in a student survey at the University of New South Wales in 1969, students at that University classified their aspirations in order of preference as -

1) To acquire qualifications permitting entrance into a chosen vocation.

2) To develop a broad general outlook and familiarity with a variety of subjects.
3) To acquire a degree of expertise in a particular field.
4) To have the ability to evaluate and to be critical.
5) To develop personal characteristics, sound values and principles.
6) To become independent.
7) To learn to get along with other people.

In these, students were stating what they hoped to attain. Staff, when asked what they thought students should seek to attain, were very clearly in favour of development of the ability to evaluate and to be critical.

It would seem to me from this sample that the majority of students see professional training as their main responsibility whereas staff seek a more classical University attitude of development of the abilities to evaluate and to be critical. Has the staff of Universities changed in this attitude since 1969, on the basis of economic or social pressures, or would the majority still aim at this level of development?

In this appraisal of what I consider the main functions of a University to be, I have been tremendously conscious of the increased public awareness of the functions of Universities in the societies, particularly since the improvements in communication media.

In Australia a relative minority of radicals sees the Universities as serving to further consolidate the position of the so-called upper class and to frustrate the kinds of revolutionary social change the radicals see as desirable.

There appears to be a much more vocal section of conservatively minded people who see University authorities as neglecting responsibility and thus helping to subvert the traditional values on which our society is based. Further, they believe that the University has provided the breeding ground for a new type of cult in youth, founded on the use of drugs, permissive sexual relationships, and radical political ideas.

Which of these groups, if either, is correct? We do not know because at this position in time when there does appear to be a potential cultural and social transformation, we cannot predict whether any moves will be ultimately beneficial or harmful to the nation.

But I do believe that these external opinions could become significant in the continuing role of Universities in society, particularly when there now appears to exist a more publicly manageable form of Tertiary Education in Institutes of Technology and Colleges of Advanced Education.

However it is obvious that in all Universities in Australia, there are definite indications that certain Administrators, Academics and students see the time as ripe for consideration and implementation of substantial changes in University Education.
There is developing a new willingness to experiment, a new interest in the needs of students, and a growing concern for those who have been denied access to University education by the conventional examination methods.

Where does James Cook University stand? Or should I say where does this James Cook Institution stand?

On the basis of what I have outlined I believe we serve the functions of a University, limited only by the restraints of adequate finance to develop the breadth of Faculties which would allow exchange between educated people of all disciplines.

But compare our situation with that of the larger Universities, because here the small numbers do permit close interaction of students and staff in the true spirit of University learning, a ready recognition of difficulties of all sections of students and staff, and the ability to introduce changes because there is no restricting hand of tradition.

Whether we take advantage of the situation depends on us - apathy on the part of the student or on the part of the staff can restrict improvement.

Our ability to develop intellectual curiosity, to develop the ability to think clearly and to make decisions on the basis of objectively weighed evidence will determine our future.

I believe we are a University and on the basis of believing that things of importance will continue, and taking cognisance of today's "Bull Sheet", while risking the wrath of anti-Royalists, I would close with a comparative statement.

"JAMES COOK IS DEAD LONG LIVE JAMES COOK"

J.T. BAKER

(Associate Professor, Department of Chemistry.)

POEM

the Sea loved the Mountain
stretched long and languid
against the coast's curve,
beyond its fanning reach,
its restless fingers.

it was the Mountain's
constant stilled solitude
that haunted the bitter-sweet
ever swirling searching of the Sea.

MARIA FRESTA