

## **Session 10:** Plenary Session

**Title:** How do universities justify their existence?

**Chair/Provocateur:** Professor Michael Gibbons, Secretary General, ACU

**Panel Members:** Professor Patrick Coldstream, former Director, UK Council for Industry and Higher Education

Sir John Daniel, Assistant Director-General, UNESCO and former Vice-Chancellor, Open University, UK

Dr Paul Davenport, Vice-Chancellor and President, University of Western Ontario, Canada

**Rapporteur:** Dr Vikkii Chen, ACU

### **The Problem**

Since the 1980s it has become increasingly difficult to secure adequate public funding for tertiary education. Today, universities all over the Commonwealth are having to justify to their (sometimes sceptical) governments why tertiary education is still of critical importance to the economic development of their country. Yet this is a hard task, for Universities are not used to justifying their existence.

The problem is compounded, moreover, in the context of rapidly increasing competition from a wide range of alternative providers of education. When so much is on offer from privately funded institutions, from the corporate sector and from providers of virtual education, why should the public purse continue to support universities?

### **Some possible solutions**

The main points that emerged from the presentations and the discussion were as follows:

- Governments are likely to be persuaded by hard evidence of the relevance of what universities "do" as far as the economic, industrial and socio-cultural development and well-being of the nation is concerned, and of how they contribute, thereby, to the country's long-term security.
- Universities need to "package" and "market" to their governments and to their communities information about the extent to which their research projects are addressing and solving real problems in the world of industry, business, medicine, engineering etc.; and show how their teaching programmes are producing graduates who will contribute to the economic growth and health of the country.
- Universities have the intellectual capacity to demonstrate to their governments the need to re-invest in their country and their people, through their universities, to help solve their countries' problems.

- This pre-supposes, and endorses the recommendation, that universities engage with their communities on a continuing basis in order to establish how best they can work in collaboration with society, government, industry and commerce to identify and tackle problems of common concern. (In this context, Professor Coldstream made reference to the ACU paper *Engagement as a Core Value for the University: A Consultation Document*, copies of which may be obtained from the secretariat.)
- Universities have to show their initiative and make things happen. Dr Davenport related, for instance, how the University of Western Ontario reviews every course it provides and reports on its effectiveness, showing how it impacts on the economic development of the country, and demonstrating why the institution deserves public funds.
- By working with government and society to achieve common goals, universities are more likely to receive public funding. Equally, they are less likely to find themselves being challenged by privately funded institutions that may otherwise step in to provide education in subjects that society and governments clearly want and need.
- Orienting university policies and practices to reflect and tackle the challenges faced by societies today does not mean giving up autonomy.
- In the light of some twenty years of emphasis, in many parts of the Commonwealth, on the funding of primary and secondary education at the expense of tertiary education, and in the face of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the supply of tomorrow's teachers, it is especially important that governments are persuaded of the need to support universities in their provision of teacher education.
- With reference to teacher education, Sir John Daniel spoke of UNESCO's "Education for All" programme and highlighted how important the role of the universities will be if the programme's targets are to be met by 2015. In this context, he urged participants to ponder just how much could be achieved towards education for all if the wealth of intellectual resources that are available within the ACU membership were exploited through collaborative activity.