The University Idea

By R. E. PRIESTLEY*

What ought a University to be and to do? That is a question I have asked myself many times during my career as a University administrator. It has naturally enough occupied my thoughts more than ever since I came to Australia as Vice-Chancellor of Melbourne University. Let me try and answer it on paper—for my own benefit as well as for the interest of readers of the "Australian Quarterly."

My idea of a University is that it should take in the best of each generation of the community that it serves, be it Nation, State, or City, regardless of means and station; that it should afford to those who enter it the opportunity of free and full development of character, body and mind; and that from it should come, in a continuous stream, the men and women who will lead the community of the future, the ideas upon which its future shall be moulded and the ideals by which its people shall be inspired. This may seem to many people to be an unrealizable ideal. Nevertheless, however much we may be dissatisfied with the world of to-day, we must admit that at any rate the first of these three objectives has been approached more nearly in the Anglo-Saxon countries, and in some others, in the last century, than ever before, and, if we keep the ideal steadily in mind, we should progress towards all three objectives every year.

I receive a large number of letters from people who are critical either of myself or of my University. This month one such correspondent opened his argument with, "First of all, are not the students who attend a University the sons and daughters of the idle rich?" There was better stuff in his letter than this, and I paid him the compliment of sending him a reasoned reply. But the fact that some parts of his letter merited reply showed that he had thought about Universities, and it is unfortunate that a man who thinks and reads should to-day hold the opinion that is quoted above. Even Oxford and Cambridge are no longer the preserve of the well-to-do. In my speech at Melbourne University commencement ceremony in April last I said of Cambridge University that "twenty per cent. at least of her undergraduates are scholars partly or wholly maintained in an expensive University by scholarships and grants." Some of my hearers were surprised, but, if anything, the remark was an under-

*Dr. R. E. Priestley, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne.

statement. In a lecture read before Yale University, Mr. Will Spens, Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, said some years since:—

> "Scholarships are supported to some extent by special endowments given for the purpose, but my college spends five or six times as much as is provided in this way, and that proportion is not exceptional. Further, apart altogether from college scholarships, both the National Government and County Councils offer scholarships tenable at the University, and the colleges give grants to deserving students other than scholars. The result is that at many colleges nearly half the students are in receipt of financial assistance, and a considerable number of these are entirely supported by such assistance."

Such figures as these show that we have moved a good distance towards the ideal that I have stated, and we still advance. Scholarships and exhibitions increase in number annually. The endowment of them has become a recognized and popular form of private benefaction. Governments look upon the foundation of scholarships and the reservation of free places as a natural part of their paternal activities.

It might with justice be claimed, indeed, that we err as much in the fact that we take into our Universities many persons who are not sufficiently endowed by Nature to benefit fully from a University education, as that we fail to draw into the University net any great amount of talent and capacity from the ranks of youth outside. It is certainly true that many scholarship holders make disappointing University examination records. More serious is it that many do not justify their selection by their record in after life. But this may partly be because we fail in what we give them at the University after their arrival.

I do not claim for a moment that the University entrance system is ideal. Indeed, it must be obvious to any thinking person that it falls short of the ideal in many ways. And the Universities themselves are not unconscious of the fact. The stranglehold exercised by the University entrance examinations upon the schools, although not altogether the fault of the Universities themselves—for these examinations are put to many uses for which they were not designed —is troubling the Universities throughout the world. Reform is overdue and is on the way. In England the Northern Universities have already broken with tradition: in Australia our own University is considering the question as I write.

I am not sure that any examination man can devise would do ideally what we need. I have wondered whether some places at Uni-

versities might not be filled by headmasters' nomination, for some minds develop late, and some men are worth training for leadership by reason of personality rather than acuteness of intellect. Perhaps these last will always come to the top whether they pass through the Universities or not, but they could not fail to benefit by much that they would gain from a life in a real University at the most formative period of their lives. In any case there is bound to be some leakage, for many potential scholars, through force of circumstances or pressure from ill-advised parents, impatient to have them stand on their own feet, will not reach the secondary education stage. Universities such as Melbourne cater even for these, for they can reach the University as part-time students later in their career. If they join a University in this capacity, however, it cannot be expected that the University will give them all that it could have done if it had had them wholly within its sphere of influence at an earlier stage in their career. Nevertheless, any University that accepts this category of students ought, in my opinion, to be able to do for them much more than Melbourne University at present does, or can reasonably be expected to do with its present resources.

It follows from what I have said that, so far as Melbourne University is concerned (I understand that in some other Australian Universities the situation is very different), I am in favour of still further extension of the system of Scholarships and Free Places. I am, but only on certain conditions that I believe to be essential. The University must maintain its entrance standards—even raise them as the general educational standard of the community is raised—while not forgetting to revise them from time to time as our conception of the ideal entrance test takes shape. I believe, for instance, that many students come to Australian Universities a year or two too soon for them to benefit to the full extent from University life and University education, though the time may not yet have come when the intervening years can be profitably employed at school in all cases.

My second condition is that the community must see that, for every Free Place, the University income is proportionately increased. It is no good making a University accept new students if thereby it is forced to give less to the students it already has and to give to the newcomers less than it should. At present many Universities are giving to their students far less than they ought to give, and the latter are very conscious of that fact.

In these days of governmental concern with the everyday affairs of the people, it is perhaps necessary to add yet a third reservation to the two I have already defined. Perhaps the outstanding advantage that the University of the Anglo-Saxon world enjoys to-day is its freedom from dictation from without. No additional financial assistance, however lavish, could repay a University for the loss of this autonomy which should be its most prized possession. No calamity could so destroy the University idea: make so impossible the pursuit of University ideals. Its devastating effect can be seen in some countries to-day where entrance to the University is dependent upon acceptance of particular political dogmas or of narrow racial ideas. I believe that in a democracy, with its sudden and frequent alternations of party control, the result of interference with the autonomy of the University would be worse even than in the totalitarian state, for even continuity of policy would be lost. It is perhaps worse to get nowhere at all than to arrive at the wrong destination. Vacillation is as likely to produce intellectual starvation as dictation to produce a surfeit of some particular intellectual food, and a surfeit is more easily cured by getting rid of the indigestible food. Public opinion, and the good sense and enthusiasm of its own staff, should provide all the guidance, stimulus and control that a University needs.

And when the raw material reaches the University what can the University provide? It is here especially that I think many of us are likely to make a mistake. It is too easy to think of a University as being merely an avenue by which a man proceeds, and its various examinations as rungs of a ladder up which he climbs—or fails to climb, as the case may be—to the more jealously-guarded professions such as Medicine, Teaching, Engineering, Architecture, and Law. Now, in my view, a University should be much more than that. It should have a threefold function, of which the imparting of knowledge is only one, and that not even the most important one.

A University should be a fellowship of students and teachers, living in close and intimate association, with the threefold objective of passing on from one generation to another man's inherited knowledge, extending the boundaries of that knowledge, and learning and teaching how life can be lived in the fullest and best sense. Investigation and research should be essential to its well-being, and in this original work all should play a part: the staff as part of their ordinary duty: the best and most advanced students under direction as part

of their training: the remainder as eager participants in the knowledge gained.

I have recently read, heard or written three definitions, that I like, of what a University should do for its students. The first comes from the writings of one of two Australian professors—Professors Murdoch and Wood Jones—whose lighter efforts have been a great comfort to me through a strenuous and rather disturbing time. Professor Murdoch writes in one of his essays:—"*The house of the mind contains a number of windows, through which we look on the great and moving spectacle of life. The educated man is the man able to use all these windows; if one of them is sealed, to that extent his education must be called defective; if all of them are sealed but one* (he is talking of the specialist) *he must be called uneducated. . . . The aim of education, as I see it, is to help its students to clean their windows; all their windows.*"

It would not be easy to draw in a few words a more graphic word-picture of what should be the aim of a University in trying to achieve the first objective mentioned above.

Dr. Hutchison's description of what University education should do for the medical student is another thing that stays in my mind. At the recent conferring of Honorary degrees at Melbourne, he said: "*Sound medical education should develop in the students a cultivated imagination; sanity; humour; breadth of view; and a highly-developed power of criticism.*"

For my own self-respect I will finish this answer to my first question with a quotation from a broadcast appeal of my own. I suspect it of being defective since the appeal only brought in one guinea, but I liked it at the time and I still think that it is true: "*The University's main objective should be to broaden the outlook of its students, to give them an abiding interest in the intellectual and social problems of their day, to develop all sides of their character and intellect to the utmost, and to teach them to tolerate and understand the opinions and way of life of other people.*"

Of the third of the three aims of a University these definitions do not speak, but without investigation the transmission of knowledge cannot properly be achieved. Let us attempt now to answer the question:—"Why Must a University Take its Part in Research?" To the University teaching officer this should, and probably would, appear to be a superfluous question, for a University cannot exist without research. Nevertheless it must be asked and answered,

for research is an expensive occupation, even pure research, since it takes time and cannot be carried out by men overburdened with formal teaching and harassed by preoccupations about making both ends meet. A research-conscious University, and that definition will include any University worth while, must be staffed on a more generous scale than a technical college or a school. Nor is it possible or desirable, as in business organizations, which nowadays often have their own research staff, to isolate University research in a laboratory or in institutes by itself. Every University teacher, if he is to do his teaching job well, should himself be exploring about the boundaries of knowledge in some branch of his subject. If he is not, he will not be able to give his pupils what they have a right to expect. It is true that some men and women have less aptitude than others for original work, but, at the least, any University teacher should be given the opportunity, and should be expected, to keep himself informed of the recent advances made in his own and closely-related fields of knowledge. If he is not enabled and encouraged to do so; if he has not the desire and the ability to do so, his teaching will rapidly deteriorate, become less stimulating to his pupils, and his service thus less valuable to his University and to the community.

Failure to realize this fact, with a consequent tendency to increase the burden of formal teaching, sustained by already overworked teaching officers, is one of the principal shortcomings of the University of to-day. This is especially true in the professional subjects, the content of all of which increases year by year. Unless the Universities face up to this problem there is grave danger of their turning assets into liabilities; helps into hindrances. They will absorb each year the pick of their own products and turn them into routine hacks, capable of preparing candidates efficiently for not-too-well-designed examinations, but of little else. And the University product will itself steadily decline. If this occurs, the community will not be able to absolve itself from blame. In the last resort the people that the Universities serve are responsible for the undoubted fact that their Universities are understaffed. This is true, even though the Universities themselves have been less than wise in permitting the programme of teaching to increase by failure to prune and re-design syllabuses as the body of knowledge has increased; in their failure also to recognize that the hey-day of the formal lecture or "reading" as the staple of University education should have passed with the invention of the printing press.

But there is another reason why research should be a central activity of a University. There is no other institution so well fitted to carry out "pure" as contrasted with "applied" research, and without pure research, applied research and industry can make no advance. Without the researches of the great physicists into the nature of matter and energy, the progress of the electrical industry, one of the marvels of the present day, could not have taken place. Without the work in University laboratories on the chemistry and biology of animals and plants, we should now be struggling with problems of scarcity instead of with problems of plenty. And we should—a fact we are inclined to forget—be very much worse off even than we are. We need to be reminded now and again that, about the end of last century, one of our scientists—Sir William Crooks—prophesied that in 1924 or thereabouts the world would be facing wholesale starvation through nitrogen shortage and its effect upon the size of the wheat crop. He was not a good prophet, but he might well have been but for the Universities' fostering of pure research. If the Universities had turned their attention early enough to investigation of the human animal and his possibilities, we should be much nearer the millennium than we are.

I am not claiming for a moment that the Universities should have a monopoly of research. My contention is that, without a lively interest in original work, they cannot perform their other functions properly; that there is one kind of research for which they are better fitted than any other organization of man's devising; and that they are the institutions at which the research workers required by themselves, and by Research Institutes and industrial research laboratories, are most easily and most efficiently trained.

And Australia, of all nations, can least afford to neglect either Universities or research. The world gets more difficult to live in to one's own satisfaction every day, and this is true for nations as well as for individuals. To make the most of her best men is vital to Australia to-day as it has perhaps never been before. The success of her Universities is not a matter that affects the degree of her prosperity only, but it is essential to her survival. It is in the Universities and through the Universities that her future leaders must be trained. Into them should go all the best material she has. They should be given every facility to train these selected men and women as they ought to be trained, and to turn out the finished product, fully developed in body; with high ideals; with critical and well-stored

minds; and able to use the processes and tools of the profession or other way of life to which they are called.

I have no doubt whatever about Australia *needing* the sort of University that I have outlined above as being a worthy objective; but does she *want* such universities? They cannot be had without expense. I should, it is true, in my own University, like to see the teaching programme of formal instruction considerably reduced. But this can only be done if it is supplemented by a more expensive system of informal teaching which will ensure close touch between staff and students, and by a University Library several times the size of the present one. For the best results the lecture programme should perhaps be *halved* and the teaching staff *doubled.* In this latter respect, especially, I should like to see the Cambridge theoretical standard approached, with its ideal of the division of the University teaching officer's time more or less equally between research, teaching and that informal contact with students which, in my view, is one of the first essentials of the true University. In practice, both in Oxford and Cambridge, there are, one must admit, wide divergencies from this ideal, but it is an ideal worth working towards none the less.

It is a matter, to my mind, of making up our minds what expenditure is most essential to the welfare of the country. If we take the long view—or so I believe—the future of Australia will depend upon the way that she is led through the ever-increasing difficulties and complexities that beset civilised peoples to-day. In my view, Leadership depends, first, on the quality of the best among the people of a country; second, upon the training that they receive in youth; third, upon the experience that they gain as they go through life. And the more complicated civilization becomes the more important does the second essential become. Without it the best cannot be made of the material: the most cannot be gained from the experience. Of the quality of the best of Australian youth we cannot doubt; there is none better in the world. There can, however, be few places in the world where true University training is more important. One chief danger of an isolated community is that of the adoption of a narrow viewpoint. The more discussion the student takes part in, the more reading he can do, the closer contact he has with his companions and his teachers, the more he and they take part in original work, the more fully developed will the product be, the broader will be its outlook, the greater will be its knowledge, and the wider its sympathies. Preoccupation with narrow professional training and lack of the research outlook are, in my opinion, the chief dangers against which we have to guard in the University of to-day.