

Remaking a Great University: U.P. in the 21st Century

A Vision Statement for the University of the Philippines
by
Alfredo E. Pascual
President, UP Alumni Association
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Many of us remember U.P. as a great university, the best in the country, and a respected center of learning in Asia. Over the recent years, however, comparative surveys of world universities have jolted us into realizing that U.P.'s preeminent position as an institution of higher learning has faded. The Times Higher Education-QS World University Rankings, for instance, placed UP at 262nd in 2009. This was some improvement from 276th in 2008 and 398th in 2007 but still way too low for comfort. Worse, these rankings have positioned UP as just the second best university in the Philippines since the time it became a 'centenarian' in 2008.¹ While we may question the validity and value of the rankings based on their heavy emphasis on research publication in refereed international journals, the comparison has been made. Now, in this age of global competitiveness, the perception of U.P. as a university must inevitably include its position relative to others in the country and the world.

While these reports must have been demoralizing for some, U.P. has continued, in typical fashion, to discuss possible directions for moving forward. In May 2009, a U.P. System conference was convened on the theme "The Challenge of Being a National University: Towards UP's Second Century". By that time, about a year had passed since the enactment of the new UP Charter of 2008 that declared UP as the country's national university and the peak of the Centennial celebration that featured lectures by university insiders and invited guests on UP's past and future. More significantly, the conference was held about a year also prior to the start of search and election of a new UP President. The insights generated at the conference into the issues and dilemmas facing UP at present should certainly help inform the plans and programs of a candidate aspiring to lead UP for the next six years.

¹ Ateneo de Manila University was ranked by THE-QS 234th in 2009, 254th in 2008 and 451st in 2007.

Reading through a synthesis of the conference proceedings, I was struck by an observation that the same issues came up at this conference again as those tackled in three earlier faculty conferences held in 1995, 1996, and 1997.² It seems that these soul-searching questions have been percolating through the UP community for the past decade and a half, waiting to be brought to a satisfactory resolution. I am sure the incumbent UP leadership has begun to take heed of the options and recommendations identified at the conference. Still, I believe that the next UP President must finally confront these issues and decisively choose where to bring UP in the coming years. While this has to be done to achieve the missions imposed upon it by its new Charter, UP must also ensure that it retains its relevance in today's globalizing world where production and distribution is driven by new knowledge being created at an ever accelerating pace.

In the face of the formidable challenges attending these goals, there is an opportunity to remake U.P. as a great university in the 21st century.

A great university takes a leadership role in the educational, cultural, social, and economic development of the country it serves. U.P. as the national university must give paramount consideration to national concerns. U.P. should pursue its teaching, research and extension service functions not only within the framework of its many academic disciplines but more so in the context of national development needs that are ever changing and becoming increasingly complex. U.P. has a historic commitment of service to the Filipino nation. In the 21st century, this must include efforts to help the country become a significant and positive player in global society.

A great university is anchored on academic excellence. U.P. must strengthen its tradition of excellence in teaching (disseminating knowledge), research (creating knowledge) and extension service (applying knowledge). Academic excellence means the pursuit of knowledge in an atmosphere that encourages learning while demanding high levels of performance. It means the creation of new knowledge through research that passes stringent peer review. It also means the effective application of research results in addressing societal problems and integration of all aspects of academic activities.

² In the 2009 U.P. System Conference: a Synthesis by Dr. Maria Cynthia Rose B. Bautista published in *The Forum* of May-June 2010 (Vol. 11 Issue 3), it says that the subject conference "resonates with the themes of three other system-wide faculty conferences held more than a decade ago – Values and U.P. Education (1995); U.P. in the Service of the Nation (1996); and Globalization, Nationalism, and U.P. (1997). The synthesis further points out, "Those of us who attended the previous conferences noted that this conference reiterated the same issues."

A great university has a highly recognized research function. U.P. must upgrade its research capability, building it up from its existing and promising centers of excellence. Crucial to achieving this is an expanded graduate program. Also important is an environment that guarantees academic freedom, unshackled by sectarian constraints or commercial interests.

Incentives are now awarded to faculty researchers who pass the metric of the international scientific community for scholarly competence and get published in ISI/peer-reviewed journals. Such incentives must continue as they contribute to knowledge creation while helping U.P. improve its standing in the league of world universities. However, U.P. must give equal recognition to research and other outputs in the arts that, although not a global priority, are nonetheless significant contributions to knowledge in these fields and relevant to the social, cultural, and economic development of our nation.

A great university has excellent faculty and staff. U.P. must recruit, maintain and develop the best academic staff. It must entice its best graduates and the best graduates of other great universities in the country to commit themselves to professional careers in the University. At the same time, it should enrich the mix of its faculty, and research and extension staff by developing programs for attracting carefully selected international scholars on a visiting status or other workable arrangements. It should provide the environment which motivates faculty and staff towards excellent performance and high productivity.

Since its faculty and staff are the most precious resource of the University, U.P. must observe employment/compensation terms that are fair to all categories of staff. All personnel, whether faculty or staff, have the same need for basic social services (e.g., medical care) and should be provided with similar and equitable benefit packages. Incentive programs should be set up to reward outstanding faculty and staff performance.

A great university recruits students from among the best and brightest in the community it serves. Surely, U.P. must admit only the best high school graduates in the Philippines. But as the national university, U.P. must also take steps to democratize admission. An inclusive policy should make it be possible for college applicants with a disadvantaged high school background to be considered for admission. In addition, no qualified students should be constrained to forego a U.P. education simply because of financial reasons. Scholarships and financial assistance programs should be in place for need-based support.

A great university prepares its students for successful careers and responsible citizenship. With globalization, graduates will be working in a fast-changing world in the age of information. U.P. must impart to its students not just technical information that will likely be obsolete by the time they graduate. U.P. must develop in the students the capacity for critical thinking; for continued learning; and for effectively dealing with ambiguity, complexity and uncertainty. This requires skills in problem solving, including the ability to gather and process relevant information, and to work with others who can contribute to finding solutions. In addition, as the national university, U.P. must also prepare its graduates for leadership roles in their respective disciplines and professions, if not in the country. U.P.'s curricula and teaching methods should be designed to respond to these needs. A strengthened general education program should enable students to develop broader perspectives and a cross-disciplinary orientation, sound ethical standards, the values of good citizenship and, hopefully, a strong bias for serving the country.

A great university is financially sustainable. For the U.P. System, financial sustainability is a continuing serious concern. The new Charter charges U.P. to perform a leadership role in higher education and national development. U.P. is expected to serve and lead as a graduate university, as a research university, as a public service university and as a regional and global university all at the same time. Yet, the commitment of the national government under the Charter "to fund the continued growth, operation and maintenance of the national university through annual appropriations" has barely taken care of current operational costs and incremental improvements. Not enough funds are being appropriated annually to meet the rising cost of a quality U.P. education, much less to sustain capital expenditures for upgrading the university facilities.

To enable U.P. to undertake its missions to the fullest and remake it as a great university in the 21st century, a quantum leap is needed in the physical development of U.P. campuses and their technological infrastructure for teaching and research. Budget allocations negotiated annually may not yield the funding for the necessary capital expenditures. U.P. needs a long-term funding commitment from the government above what is currently being allotted to it annually. To get this commitment, the UP leadership must prepare a 10-year development plan that convincingly builds the case of U.P. as a key to national development. This development plan will be used as the basis for negotiating an increase in the level of annual appropriations for U.P. In funding the plan implementation, one possible source that can be explored is the corporate income tax, among others. A certain percentage of this tax may be earmarked

during, say, the next 10 years to seed the U.P. modernization fund. The government may also be asked to tap international development agencies for funding specific components of the plan.

To supplement direct government funding, U.P. must intensify efforts to generate support from alumni as well as other donors and philanthropic sources. The tax incentive provision of the Charter can be used to attract donations for U.P. from Philippine-based donors. But the fund raising efforts should be international in scope. Arrangements should be made for foreign donors to course their donations through U.P.-linked foundations, like in the U.S., for tax-saving purposes. The objective is to build up an endowment fund that will help sustain U.P. financially.

The University must also continue with vigor the programs to establish linkages and pursue partnerships with government agencies, private enterprises, and foreign institutions, particularly for research and development activities. Funding from such linkages can supplement the annual budget appropriations. It is important to note that these programs should be driven by U.P.'s own research agenda. Some mechanism, such as the Research Endowment Fund, should be maintained and augmented to enable U.P. to undertake research projects that are of vital importance to the University and the country but which may not by themselves attract external funding.

U.P. has significant holdings of land and other assets which may be used to generate extra funds to meet the University's needs. Examples of these needs are the incentives and welfare benefits for faculty and staff to help retain great talents and funds for providing need-based support for students. Transformation of these assets into productive uses is already being done by U.P. and other great universities elsewhere, through partnerships with the private sector. Such partnerships for commercialization of assets should be distinguished from commercialization of education, which is not at all acceptable. Safeguards must, of course, be in place (e.g., adequate planning of asset uses and competitive selection of business partners) to maximize the financial gains of U.P. from such commercial ventures. In addition, the injunction in the Charter must be observed that funds generated from the University's properties "shall not be meant to replace, in whole or in part, the annual appropriations provided by the national government to the national university."

While various sources of funding will be tapped, U.P. must ensure that there are no wasteful expenditures. The cost of running the University should be well

managed. U.P. should clearly identify the real costs of activities across its campuses, rigorously monitor expenditures, and avoid costly inefficiencies and duplications. U.P. should also implement productivity improvements through the creative use of technology and train/retrain staff on a continuing basis to hone their skills.

A top priority for U.P. is to keep to the minimum the tuition costs borne by students and parents. U.P. must maintain an excellent but affordable tertiary education for qualified students from the mass of our people. For equity reasons, U.P. must preserve its public character. The commitment of the national government to underwrite the cost of a U.P. education is critical. Without adequate public funding, it will be difficult to assure that tuition fee increases can be held in check indefinitely. U.P. must be a university where students earn their degrees as *Iskolar ng Bayan* regardless of the economic status of their family. U.P. graduates must feel an obligation to serve the people in return. We do not want a situation in which only children of financially able families can make it to U.P. The profile of the U.P. studentry must approximate the socio-economic distribution of the Philippine population, about 70% of which belongs to the lower and lower-middle income classes.

A great university is a model for good governance to the country it serves. The U.P. leadership must observe the principles of democratic governance based on collegiality, representation, transparency, predictability, and accountability. The practice of good governance should be an ongoing commitment. When contemplating significant policy changes which have wide and far-reaching effects, the U.P. leadership should go through a process of consultation to explain proposed changes thoroughly and obtain feedback. This process may stretch out decision making; however, it will likely hasten implementation. In the management of funds and other resources entrusted to the University, responsible stewardship and ethical conduct should additionally characterize good governance.

To me, the primary job of the next U.P. President is not so much defining U.P.'s roles as the national university, nor specifying what it takes for U.P. to be a great university. Rather, with a clear road map firmly in hand, the next U.P. president's chief task is to actually start and manage effectively the quick and determined march of U.P. through the next few years of the 21st century—a march towards becoming a great university, the best in the country, and one of the best in the region.