The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Speech By
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Making a Difference: Reflections on Shared Problems, Shared Opportunities and Shared Responsibilities in International Higher Education

Thank you President Vest for your very generous words of introduction and thank you all for the very warm welcome. It is an honour to be invited to address such a distinguished assemblage of educators. If IQ could be converted into kilowatts, I have no doubt that the quantum massed here tonight would meet the world's energy requirements for at least a decade.

In 1954 I came to the United States for the first time in my life and entered Harvard College as a first year student. It was an experience that I will never forget. All of my formal education up to that point had been in French, and although I had studied English, my command of the language was not up to the demands of Harvard's curriculum. Fortunately there were several of us in the same position and we worked together to find French editions of as many of the assigned readings as possible. We wrote our papers in French, translated them into English, and waited in fear for our grades.

By a quirk of nature, although I was born right-handed, I had the good fortune to come into this world left-footed. Soccer players who could kick with their left foot were very rare in the United States in those days. This meant that I was able to make the Freshman Soccer team as the left wing. We were a distinguished group; we turned in an undefeated season, and also had the distinction of all being on a list in the Dean's office, not to be confused with the Dean's list, although we were never troubled to explain that fine distinction very fully to our parents. To this day I am convinced that I owe my Harvard degree to my left foot.

I can tell you that I had many a sleepless night during that first year at Harvard, and when sleep came, it was often accompanied by a dream (nightmare might be more accurate). In it I was hauled up in front of a senior authority figure, thoroughly scolded about my performance, told that I was unfit to be a member of the Harvard community of scholars, and then sent back to my room to pack my bag to return home. Not knowing anything about the structure of educational institutions other than my boarding school in Switzerland, I always imagined that authority figure to be the head of the institution, or in the case of Harvard, its President. Memories of the fear I felt at having to face only one university president then, gave me little comfort as I prepared to face a room full of you here tonight.

As I turned my thoughts to what I might say on this occasion, that old fear took on a new form. How could I presume to have something to present on the subject of higher education that was worthy of the scholarship, experience and responsibilities in higher education represented in this room? I am not trained as an academic, published as a scholar, or experienced as an educational administrator. While I am not sure that my comments will fulfil the programme committee's expectations, I have decided to draw on my experience working in social and economic development in parts of Asia and Africa over the last forty years.

A number of the issues about which I will speak are touched upon in the Task Force on Higher Education convened two years ago by The World Bank and UNESCO which was co-chaired by Professor Henry Rosovsky who spoke to us so effectively this afternoon. I will illustrate and expand on them by drawing on the experience of the agencies that comprise the Aga Khan Development Network as they have worked in areas with high concentrations of the world's poor; in Central and South Asia, and in Sub-Saharan Africa. The purpose is not to "toot our own horn", but to focus on specific problems and opportunities and offer examples and lessons that can be drawn from our experience working in circumstances that are often very difficult due to the collapse of economies, political instability, and civil strife. I also hope to be able convince institutions in both the developing and the industrialised world to come together to work on some areas of common problems, opportunities and responsibilities.

For those not familiar with our work, I would note that while the Aga Khan Development Network's activities are rooted in the worldwide Shia Ismaili Muslim Community, its programmes and activities in each setting are open to all without regard to ethnicity, race, gender or religion. As a matter of policy, none of the Network's educational institutions offer instruction in religion unless required by the national curriculum.

Quality education at all levels is, and has been, critically important for all societies at all times. In the developing world education offers the poor -- opportunities for new futures, women -- higher status, and new roles in their families and communities, migrants -- an asset that is portable, and refugees -- an asset that is both portable and secure. For these reasons, the Aga Khan Education Service has for many years operated several hundred schools in Eastern Africa and Central and South Asia -many in isolated settings, with a particular interest in the education of girls. I say this because the rest of my remarks this evening will focus on higher education, and I do not want to be understood, even by implication, as believing that primary and secondary school is of lesser significance. It is critical to the existence of an informed citizenry everywhere. Quality school level education is particularly important in the developing world where only a small percentage of the population will ever be able to attend a university, and where population growth is massively more rapid than the expansion of capacity of its universities. Finally the school system has a vital role to play in preparing those who do go on for further studies to make full use of that opportunity. It is the supply system for higher education and therefore cannot be neglected.

But higher education has a special importance because of the difference it can make by developing new models and standards for other institutions in society, and by inculcating in its students the skills of critical thinking, analysis and problem solving, under-pinned by a strong grasp of moral reasoning, ethics and respect for others. While our world may be changing at a rate unprecedented in human history, it is not all positive. Negative changes are numerous; disrupting societies as evidenced by the violence that we see in so many parts of the world today. Positive change that is permanent requires strong institutions at all levels of society, and institutional development requires models, and capable and enlightened leadership. The report of the Task Force on Higher Education makes a number of important observations and recommendations in its review of higher education in the developing world. Among the most important from my perspective are those that relate to higher education as a public good, and the re-evaluation of the public returns on investment in higher education. These findings support the Task Force's recommendation for greater investment in higher education in the developing world by governments, international development organisations and private initiatives.

The questions most commonly asked when people learn that I am founding a new university are: "How many students will it have" and "when will the construction of buildings begin"? From my perspective the questions should be:

- "Given all the current problems in that country, and all the existing universities, why start another university?"
- "What will it teach?",
- "What are your expectations for the impact that the institution and graduates will have?", and finally,
- "How secure is its funding over time?"

I believe that institutions of higher education have greater prospects for success for their students and for the societies they serve when they focus on four factors: quality, relevance, impact and resources. The decision to create the Aga Khan University (or AKU as we refer to it) as the first private university in Pakistan, more than twenty years ago, was taken in the context of the deteriorating quality of higher education in the developing world. As a private university, AKU would have to remain small, but to justify the investment required it would have to become a role model for a country of more than 120 million people. To assume and retain this status AKU had to be a quality institution not only in terms of its academic offerings, but also in terms of admission and financial aid policies, governance, management and its financial health. The attraction of Board members of international standing in fields of education and development played a critical role in this quest.

Academic excellence was achieved through careful selection of faculty and the nurturing of partnerships with important institutions in the West, many of which are represented in this room -- Harvard, Johns Hopkins, McMaster, Toronto, Oxford, but also in Asia with the National University of Singapore.

But quality is not enough to justify the support of donors, society and the authorities in a developing country; a university's offerings must also be relevant. Following a study carried out with the assistance of Harvard, AKU's Board decided to focus its initial efforts on addressing the very poor quality of social services in Pakistan and much of the developing world. Today, the Faculty of Health Sciences, including Nursing, and the Institute for Educational Development, are all having an impact beyond the training of students at high levels in their respective fields. They have given new status and recognition to women professionals who constitute an overwhelming majority of teachers and nurses in the region. The Medical College's Health Sciences Department has developed a pioneering model for treating the community as a patient rather than only the individuals who present themselves for care. A fifth of medical students' curriculum time is spent in the Community Health Sciences. Nursing students also take part in this activity, and obtain their learning experiences in the rural areas of the country.

The quality and impact of the University can be further gauged from the fact that over the last fifteen years Pakistan's professional licensing body has recommended that all medical colleges in Pakistan adopt AKU's model of community based medical education. Similarly, the Pakistan Nursing Council has adopted AKU's nursing curriculum. Research has also concentrated on those themes that are relevant and have outcomes that impact society. With respect to the University's Institute for Educational Development, more than half of all course participants come from government institutions. Here the Institute's impact is not only visible in the improvements in classrooms and management of government schools, but also in government's major policy-making fora in which the Institute is invited to participate on a regular basis.

This is the kind of role that a small private university with strong international connections can play if it focuses on quality, relevance and impact and seeks opportunities to share its experience and human resources with other institutions and society as a whole. Examples, models and well-trained graduates can contribute to the improved performance of the vast number of schools, universities, health clinics and hospitals that exist in countries like Pakistan but often are functioning at levels far below their potential, and those necessary to meet the country's needs.

I would now like to shift to another area of great importance for higher education in the developing world. Here I refer to the rapid advances in communications and information technology of the last ten to fifteen years that have opened up the prospect of dramatically expanding international linkages and the reach of educational programmes in both spatial and temporal terms. This topic is on the agenda for tomorrow, and most appropriately so for an international gathering of educational leaders like this. It is true that the implications of the impact of communications and information technologies on the role, structure and functioning of the university, as we have known it are only beginning to emerge. But their development is important for universities everywhere in the world, even though applications may vary for some time to come.

The ability to project programmes and activities over great distances can bring educational opportunities and resources into settings where they are poorly developed at present, because of financial constraints, or sheer isolation. Where individuals have

access to computers in their homes or, as will be the case in rural areas in developing countries for some time to come, in community centres, technology can provide the first real opportunity for lifelong education on a broad scale. One lesson is clear. The mastery of the use of the essential elements of communication and information technologies will have to be part of the experience of every university student sooner rather than later. The use of the technology should have a place in the educational process itself, and its mastery should be on the list of competencies that every graduate should possess.

But this is only the first step. Even in the United States, the founder and leader in the development and application of information and communication technologies, the realisation of their potential for education is still at a very early stage. A few weeks ago Lawrence Grossman, former president of NBC News and the Public Broadcasting Service, and Newton Minow, former chairman of the Federal Communications Commission and PBS made this point in their op-ed piece entitled "The U.S. Should Invest in a Digital Library" that appeared in the International Herald Tribune. They introduce the recommendation in the article's title by observing that " . . . the Internet and digital communication are being largely wasted in America as a resource for the kind of broad education the future demands," that " . . . entertainment of marginal quality dominates commercial attempts on the Internet to reach a mass audience," while at the same time "the treasures in U.S. libraries, schools and museums are locked away for want of money to make them available to the full American audience."

I have quoted this article at some length not to advocate Grossman's and Minow's solution -- although I think it makes great sense for the United States and would also be a priceless gift to the rest of the world and the cause of world peace. I do so because it so clearly and authoritatively makes the case for concrete and imaginative steps that may lead to a fuller utilisation of the Internet for educational purposes. It is not a question of a single cosmic solution, but rather a wide range of initiatives. The Internet was created at an international research institute in Switzerland as a means to make data and finding readily available without cost to scientists around the world. Institutions of higher education have a responsibility to participate in the process of developing and shaping the use of the Internet for educational purposes in their societies and around the world.

At a seminar entitled "Architectural Education Today" held in Switzerland two weeks ago, William Mitchell, Dean of the School of Planning and Architecture at Massachusetts Institute of Technology and an authority on the use of the Internet for a wide range of purposes, offered a succinct summary of some of the advantages and disadvantages of the use of the Internet for remote education. He stated that the debate that focuses on conventional versus remote education is wrongly formulated. The issues are their relative advantages and disadvantages -- including effectiveness and cost -- and their complementary use.

Remote education is disadvantaged because it does not offer the value-added that comes with proximity to the instructor and the cross fertilisation with other students in the classroom or studio. Because users need facilities and training to draw on it and shape it to their needs, it carries high overheads, particularly at the outset. On the positive side, remote education has the advantages of scale. It dramatically increases

the reach to scattered rural communities, which still represent the vast majority of the developing world's population, it adds the possibility of bringing imported expertise into remote and isolated contexts, it creates opportunities for cross-cultural experiences, and it makes possible the broad collaboration of specialists in scattered locations. Dean Mitchell contends that such efforts can reap the benefits of what he calls "educationally mediated globalisation," which respects and incorporates intellectual diversity and cultural pluralism.

Examples are more meaningful than these generalisations. I will offer two rather different case studies of efforts by agencies of the Aga Khan Development Network to make more effective use of the Internet for educational purposes.

The first is a project to develop a World Wide Web based resource to enrich the information available for architectural students, teachers, scholars and professionals interested in architecture in the Islamic world. It builds on twenty-five years of cultural research, education and revitalisation by the Aga Khan Program for Islamic Architecture at Harvard and MIT, and the programmes of what is now the Aga Khan Trust for Culture in Geneva.

These initiatives were launched following a series of consultations with architectural scholars and professionals of all faiths and from different parts of the world who were brought together to address a black hole in Islamic societies with respect to one of the most important dimensions of their identity and heritage - their built environment. At that time there was a real vacuum; there was little scholarship, no centres for study and professional training, and no collections of visual and textual resources on one of history's greatest traditions of architecture. The dominant perspective was that improvements in the quality of life demanded the adoption of the symbolism and style of countries and societies that were considered "advanced". Twenty-five years later a complete turn-around has been achieved. Not only have patrons and professionals come to understand and embrace this important form of cultural expression, the inventories of buildings found in different countries have revealed and legitimated a diversity of expression of which even the Islamic world itself was unaware.

The emergence of the World Wide Web as a vehicle allows these efforts in public and professional education of the last twenty-five years to take on an entirely new scale. The project, called ArchNet, is being developed at MIT and is scheduled for launch in September. It will bring together and make available the visual and textual information amassed in collections in Cambridge and Geneva. Though microscopic in comparison, it is an example of just the kind of digitalisation of inaccessible material for which Grossman and Minow are arguing.

But the example does not stop here. It is not enough to simply "dump" information into communities around the world, even if, as in this case, they are communities of trained professionals. As an integral part of the ArchNet project, space on the Website has been provided for users to exhibit their own work, to communicate with other ArchNet members, and participate in informal discussions of topics of their choice that are relevant to the overall purpose of the project, and to participate in organised discussions, including collaborative design studios. Equally important, schools and departments of architecture with interests in the Islamic world can establish sections on the Website to present their programmes, activities, and collections of visual and

textual materials. In ArchNet's development phase institutions from Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Turkey, Lebanon, Egypt and Jordan were invited to help establish this dimension of the Website. Once it is officially open, other institutions may join as well. A special effort will be made to bring in schools of architecture in Central Asia and Sub Saharan Africa.

My second example relates to the new University of Central Asia. Last summer I signed an international treaty for the foundation of the university on behalf of the Ismaili Imamat with the Presidents of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The University is dedicated to addressing the problems of poverty, underdevelopment and environmental degradation in the vast and largely forgotten mountain zone of Inner Asia. By doing so, I believe it will make a significant contribution to the establishment of peace and stability in the region by addressing some of the most important problems that currently plague it: poverty, isolation, and a deep sense of hopelessness.

The University of Central Asia will provide training and research on the problems and prospects of the mountainous areas of Central Asia and the twenty to thirty million people who inhabit them. The new institution, which will begin by offering continuing education courses this year, will be private, secular, will recruit students and faculty on the basis of merit, and will be open equally to men and women. Its main campus will be based in south-eastern Tajikistan, in the town of Khorog on the Panj River, which serves as the international boundary between Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Satellite campuses will be opened in mountain settings in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and in other countries in the region who decide to join the university in the years ahead.

Given the university's locations and mission, it has no option but to make an aggressive use of the latest developments in information and communications technologies. This is particularly true for its degree programmes, which will start with a masters degree in integrated mountain studies in three years, and a bachelors degree soon thereafter. These programmes will be taught in English, and will draw heavily on databases and human resources specialised in mountain studies, to supplement the locally recruited and specially trained instructional staff. While most of you may not know it, there is a small, dedicated, but widely scattered group of specialists around the world committed to the study of mountains and mountain populations - self identified as the "mountain mafia." Their experience and knowledge will provide the kind of remote resource that can be imported, and their interaction with students and faculty, during summer visits, and throughout the year on a remote basis will lay the foundation for the kind of "mediated cross cultural dialogue" that Dean Mitchell envisions.

There is one last topic about which I would like to say a few words. Building capacity for moral reasoning and moral judgement is a goal that appears in the foundation documents of many of the world's oldest and most prestigious universities. For a number of reasons, I worry that insufficient attention is being paid to the development of these important capabilities and that the situation may worsen in the years ahead.

The advances that have occurred in the sciences-most recently in the biological sciences, and the engineering that underlies computer and information technologies -

are important for economic development and attractive to students and scholars. I applaud these developments, but worry that they will crowd out parts of the curriculum devoted to the study of the great humanistic traditions that have evolved in all civilisations throughout human history. Exposure to these traditions contributes to the formation of values, as well as an understanding of the richness and diversity of human experience. The complexities of world problems and societies today require people educated in broad humanistic traditions in addition to the guidance and direction provided by the teaching of their religion. The history of the twentieth century is replete with examples of the danger of the systematic propagation and uncritical acceptance of dogmas, ideologies, and even theologies. More than ever, I believe that universities must shoulder the responsibility for contributing to the process of building the capacity for moral judgement in complex settings. This is another area where the leading universities of the world can individually and collectively respond to a shared opportunity and a shared responsibility.

I will close by returning briefly to some basic themes. Higher education in the developing world operates under enormous pressures for which there are no simple solutions. Private institutions can make a contribution through experimentation, and where successful, as models. Linkages between institutions are critical to this process, particularly international linkages.

The identification of new sources of finance for higher education has to be a high priority. National governments in the developing world are hard-pressed to meet existing education budgets, not to mention the additional funding required for expansion to accommodate growing populations, deal with a backlog of problems, and introduce new programmes. International agencies, public and private, will help, but only within limits. The identification of private sector funding is essential, as is the creation of an environment of regulations and benefits that encourages private companies to support institutions of higher education.

It has been said that the Internet is the most important development for education since the invention of the printing press. But for now it is grossly underused for educational purposes. Universities around the world should take on the task of developing educational materials, resources and programmes for the Internet. They should add their voices to critics of regulations and policies that impinge on the use of the World Wide Web for educational purposes in favour of commercial interests.

Let us remember the historic role of "The University" in the study, interpretation and transmission of the great humanistic traditions of the world. Our search for global peace in an inter-connected, and crowded world, with rising expectations, needs to understand and internalise their many lessons more than at any time in the past.

Thank you.