

Gulf Research Meeting

7 July 2010

Remarks by Professor Dame Alison Richard

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Welcome

Your Excellencies, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen

It is a great privilege to welcome you to Cambridge. This small town in the East of England has been a melting-pot of international scholarship for 800 years. Physical boundaries are not sharply drawn here – there is no University campus: University and College buildings are embedded in the town; and national boundaries are crossed here too: within the University, Indian academics teach Singaporean graduate students about German economic theory. That sort of boundary-crossing is equally evident in our collaborations, and the University of Cambridge and the Gulf Research Centre, while distinct entities, benefit from sharing space, ideas and expertise. I am delighted that this international meeting is being held here, and I congratulate those in Cambridge and in the Gulf who have worked to bring this conference to life.

I observe that you have a busy programme, and that it has the ambition to affect life in the Gulf directly. Accordingly, I will be brief, and focus my remarks on:

What the world's great universities can contribute to the world's great challenges

Great universities share five simple but crucial characteristics:

- We are supported and sustained by society, with a duty in turn to serve society;
- We pursue academic breadth, and excellence in all we do;
- We have a unified mission to teach and do research;
- We have a high level of autonomy;
- and we are at our best when our boundaries are porous.

Let me say a brief word about each of these five characteristics, because they have deep relevance to the important endeavours of this Gulf Research Meeting.

Sustained by society

Universities, whether notionally public or private, receive financial support from society. The freedom we are granted and the support we receive bring with them obligations to society, squarely recognized in Cambridge's mission statement, which begins: "The mission of the University of Cambridge is to contribute to society...."

I spoke in October 2009 in Abu Dhabi at the Convocation of the UAE University, at the kind invitation of His Highness Sheikh Nahayan, Chancellor of the UAE University. UAE University's formal mission statement contains a similar emphasis: the UAE University "develops the intellectual, practical, creative and leadership qualities of the nation's men and women *while enhancing cultural, social, and economic growth.*" Universities have society's trust, and that makes them crucial forums for ideas, debate, and teaching that may transform society.

Breadth coupled with Excellence

It is a growing challenge to maintain breadth as well as excellence, when society and government emphasize science and technology for their contribution to economic wealth, and funding regimes and prestige tend to mirror that emphasis. But the arts and humanities contribute to the cultural wealth of society in ways less tangible but no less important – and I believe that scholarship and education in the humanities and social sciences have a vital role to play in addressing political, cultural and religious conflicts. Today is the 7th July. On this day five years ago, four British Islamists detonated bombs in the transport system of London, killing 52 people and injuring over 700. It was an attack on civil society – the society that universities help sustain. Science and engineering will not help us to understand such attacks, but the humanities and social sciences – the study of politics and of history, of psychology, of the place of religion – of societies, indeed – just might. The range of workshops in this conference shows breadth across the arts, humanities and sciences, and the conference gains strength and relevance from this.

A unified mission to teach and do research

Much of the talk about universities centres around the production of exciting discoveries in science and technology. Often, happily, the talk also turns to human enrichment through the development of cultural wealth and insight. But every bit as important as these is our role as educators – every bit as important are the students we send forth as the citizens and leaders of the future.

In recent decades, led by the sciences, the research budgets of most research-intensive universities grew quickly. The fraction of the operating budget that supports educational activities is fast diminishing as a result. In the UK these activities are still under-funded, and in research-intensive universities everywhere they receive less academic acclaim and reward. This combination of circumstances is a cause for concern, because it risks a subtle but real drift away from the educational mission of universities that is an ever more vital contribution to the world. Where new universities and higher education programmes are created in the Gulf, I observe, there is an opportunity to reset the balance.

Autonomy

For universities, there must be freedom in the air: the freedom to explore new pathways, to think, write and argue beyond that which is conventional or comfortable, to teach students to think for themselves and not as others would have them think.

In some societies, asserting these freedoms is enough to land you in prison. The challenges most of *us* confront, though, are different, much more subtle, and come as much from within as from without. Academic freedom of the kind I have described is inherently inefficient: it is the freedom to take risks and fail, the freedom to go up blind alleys for months or years on end. Isaac Newton, whose studies at Trinity College a few hundred metres from here transformed mechanics and optics, and laid the foundations of modern mathematics, also spent a great deal of time on alchemy. From today's perspective, we might

consider that time wasted – but in the orthodoxy of the mid 17th century, alchemy was not an unusual intellectual pursuit, and it had a clear and beneficial goal that attracted some of the finest minds of the day: it was not Newton’s alchemy but his mechanics that constituted the risky new territory, the potential dead end. Pressures -- self-imposed as well as externally imposed -- to be efficient, productive, and “successful” are no bad thing in some measure. But there are risks to relevance and self-imposed efficiency: that we end up constraining the grand inefficiencies of free inquiry – and snuff out the spark that is at the heart of creativity, discovery and innovation.

We must be vigilant in celebrating and protecting these great strengths – the trust of society, the unity of teaching and research, the pursuit of breadth with excellence, freedom of inquiry. But surely it helps to articulate the value and importance of these strengths and find every opportunity to uphold and defend them.

I shall spend a little more time on the fifth quality that universities bring to help us meet the world’s challenges. I have already touched on it a little – our capacity to cross boundaries.

Crossing boundaries

Universities are crossing international boundaries with increasing frequency. There are many good reasons for this. Let me propose just three, all of them evident in your programme over these next few days. The first is education. We are educating citizens and leaders for an increasingly interconnected world,

in which many of today's students will go on to live and work in a variety of national and cultural settings in the course of their lives. The second is the search for solutions to the challenges of our modern world. The third is to be of service, helping build capacity where little presently exists – though make no mistake, when Cambridge helps build capacity elsewhere, we learn a very great deal from the exchange.

Cambridge is in transition, I believe, moving from one distinct mode of internationalism to having two. The first centres on the individual. Cambridge has been welcoming visiting scholars for centuries, Cambridge academics have undertaken their own travels, and we have educated students from abroad for almost as long. I hope this will not stop. But the power of intelligent institutional partnership is becoming ever more evident.

We have chosen partnerships as our preferred institutional model for international activity, rather than establishing campuses overseas. Partnerships can be top-down or bottom-up; research-led or education-led; bilateral or multilateral. They can involve physical exchange of students and staff, the virtual exchange of ideas, or joint research projects; they can be symbiotic, or an exchange of capacity-building for institutional experience and learning.

Cambridge is building partnerships of real substance, using all of these approaches, – for example with the UAE University, and the American University of Sharjah, Sultan Qaboos University, and we play a leading role in KAUST in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. These bridges are two-way, and the

Gulf has a presence in Cambridge too, most significantly through the generosity and vision of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said, who has endowed the Professorship held by Professor Yasir Suleiman, and a new professorship in interfaith understanding; and of His Royal Highness Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, after whom the Centre of Islamic Studies is named.

However, in my experience certainly, the high-minded aspirations of donors and even Vice-Chancellors can have little effect without the enthusiasms and ambition of individual academics, and I am pleased to report that such enthusiasm is here in abundance.

Conclusion

Cambridge responds nimbly to change in the world, and helps to shape and lead it. Most of our international partnerships were developed as opportunities arose, not as a result of institutional planning. Today, we are becoming more deliberate. As global solutions are sought for global problems, we must be ready to play a leading role in international collaborations. As more and more people live and work across a range of cultures, we universities must help prepare our students for that life. As communications transform the meaning of access, we must use that opportunity creatively too. With these possibilities before us, I am certain that international collaboration will keep growing, for the best of reasons – because it is important and interesting – and for the sake of friendship between colleagues and across nations.

Your Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen, thank you once more for your presence here, and thank you for listening to my thoughts. I wish the Meeting every possible success.