

Universities Engaging with Gender Issues in Their Societies by Lorlene Hoyt

On International Women's Day, the Talloires Network and Association of Commonwealth Universities co-sponsored a plenary session entitled *Universities Engaging with Gender Issues in Their Societies* at a conference focused on women as agents of change in higher education. Grounded in such beliefs that universities should reflect and represent their societies and access the entirety of their human resource potential, the conference connected leaders in the Commonwealth for the purpose of developing strategies to increase both the quantity and quality of women leaders in higher education institutions.

Delegates from a wide array of countries participated in the 3-day conference, including representatives from: Nigeria, Botswana, Cameroon, Zimbabwe, Uganda, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa, Malaysia, Pakistan, India, Sri Lanka, Australia, Iceland, the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom and Fiji. They spoke on such topics as the gender pay gap and under-representation of senior women in universities; the particular impact of HIV/AIDS on women; and the capacity of educated women to bring about transformational change in their families and communities.

On the final day of the conference, I had the privilege of introducing and moderating a panel of exemplary Vice-Chancellors: Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Shahabudin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Dr. Samina Qadir of Fatima Jinnah Women University in Pakistan, and Dr. Janet Beer of Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom.



Dr. Samina Qadir of Fatima Jinnah Women University in Pakistan

Vice-Chancellor Qadir has held several senior administrative positions during her professional career including Dean, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; Head, Department of English Language and Literature; and Director, Women Research and Resource Centre at FJWU. Her plenary presentation entitled *Societal Involvement of Women in Higher Education Institutions* focused on viewing women as “powerful allies” in the process of social and economic change in the patriarchal culture of Pakistan. Under Dr. Qadir's leadership, FJWU challenges the concept of a typical traditional public sector institution. Through a series of photographs depicting student involvement in earthquake relief, blood donation camps, and computer clubs disabled children, she brought to life the university's long-standing commitment to civic engagement.



Dr. Janet Beer of Oxford Brookes University in the United Kingdom

Vice-Chancellor Beer is the current chair of the steering group for the National Student Survey and co-chair of the Student Charters Group. Vice-Chancellor Beer is also a Board member of the Equality Challenge Unit and the Advisory Board of the Higher Education Policy Institute. Her talk highlighted the civic role of universities and their wider impact on society. In a presentation rich with charts and statistics, Vice-Chancellor Beer made the case that university graduates tend to be happier and contribute more to society. She also illuminated the civic engagement work underway at Oxford Brookes University and unpacked key strategies for understanding and changing the culture of higher education.



Dr. Sharifah Hapsah Shahabudin of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia

Vice-Chancellor Shahabudin is President of the National Council of Women's Organisations and a member of the Talloires Network Steering Committee. Dr. Shahabudin introduced the concept of “inclusivity” and presented strategies UKM has adopted to support community engagement on gender issues. With support from the Ministry of Women, Family and Community, UKM recently established the Center for Women Leadership. At present, the Center runs a program with 70 participants to enhance their leadership capabilities and build a critical mass of women leaders in business.

This and our other conversations, however, did not end in Sri Lanka. The key issues arising from the ACU's conference were given further voice at their Women in Leadership Forum and then taken on to an even wider audience at Going Global 2012.

In closing, I would like to thank the faculty, staff, volunteers and other representatives from the University of Kelaniya's new Centre for Gender Studies, which is devoted to promoting gender equity and equality within Sri Lankan universities. They were instrumental in organizing and documenting the conference. A video recording our plenary session will soon be available on our web site: <http://www.tufts.edu/talloiresnetwork/>