

The Educational Ladder

At a recent Steering Committee meeting of the educational and human resources development think tank attention was drawn to the schools administration system, said to be in an "utter mess". Most of the matters relating to recruitment, transfers of teachers, remuneration of staff and even admission to schools have not seen consistent for a long time.

Cadre requirements have not been planned, vacancies have not been filled in a timely manner resulting in a breakdown in the school administration. The peripheral school system, particularly those in the provinces, has seen a gradual deterioration in standards. The integration of technical education and the tertiary system as well as the tertiary and university systems has been at best hazy. Plans and task force reports prepared at various stages in the past lay idle. It has become fashionable only to speak of educational reforms without substantive implementation of plans nor monitoring of progress.

The history of secondary education has witnessed a dichotomy between quantitative and qualitative development and there was no clear upward mobility towards either vocational skills or occupational skills. Vocational skills, on the other hand,

were more focused on brick and mortar institutions, where the machines, machine workshops, power looms and electrical and motor workshops were the common ground for vocational skill development. "Virtual education" was unheard of. If when teaching skills vocational instructors are not available, it leads to suspension of the curriculum and a complete breakdown in the educational system. The quality of teaching in the periphery and in the region suffered in relation to the distance of the schools from city hubs.

Most of the teachers persisted in seeking city schools, shunning village schools resulting in a total imbalance between not only the Maha Vidyalayas and the village schools but also between the schools in the Western Province and the regions. This was compounded by political interference in transfers, promotions and appointments of teachers. Where the administration of education was concerned it was a catalogue of interventions. The central and the provincial education administration held sway in total disregard to the needs of the peripheral schools.

The current system seeks to address most of these issues where emphasis will be laid on the schools more than the tertiary system. The Australian model is being studied,

where it represents a synthesis of the best practices between the American and British models. The School Development Boards which will have the autonomy for managing the central schools, provincial and village schools will come into force by the end of this year. This system will eliminate the undue interference and mismanagement of the teaching faculty and the schools. It is also presumed all recruitment of teachers will also be handled by competent independent panels so that best talent is channelled to the right jobs.

Tertiary education

The tertiary educational system despite all the ambitious plans had failed to meet the need of the private sector job market. If at all there is a redeeming feature it is the vocational schools in the apparel sector as well as the engineering trades which hand groomed talent for the private industry. The new plans look at technical and vocational education as a transitional phase to vocational careers as well as the university system. College of technologies will become virtual universities and will reach out more effectively to bridge the gap of the training needs of the private sector.

The transition from secondary education to university and postgraduate systems will

be a single line of progression with multiple entry and exit possibilities. Partnership between private sector and state institutions needs to play a role in this progression.

This multi dimensional human development strategy will look at linking the domain of competencies (knowledge, skills attitudes) to the "world of work" where, for instance, numeracy, literacy and technical skills will be translated to problem solving, divergent thinking, analytical ability and application of knowledge in the work environment. Adaptability to change and sensitivity to the physical and social environment would be most valued. Some of the initiatives would be to enable trainees and students to adapt to a variety of jobs, integrate co-curricular activities such as young entrepreneur programmes, to meet the needs of the full spectrum of the labour market.

The big question today is whether universities should evolve their own "personality" and plan their own growth and adaptation to the market requirements or be integrated into a national university system under the University Grants Commission (UGC). It was made apparent that some universities, which have a total skilled manpower equivalent to a large blue-chip

company, has a Bursar (Accountant) who is not a qualified accountant. The management skills of deans of faculties can be written on the back of a postcard. Their renowned skills are confined to academic and pedagogy. This administrative weak link has manifested itself in a variety of ills. Such as incompetence in the management of finance and reforms, even of curricular, has compounded into total resistance of all change other than those confined to presentations at learned fora and workshops.

It was widely agreed that the American or Australian experience was more appropriate than the British model, whom we have followed from post colonial times. Perhaps the Board of Regents of universities needs to be autonomous with the responsibility of managing the institutions to be self-sufficient with the exception of reimbursement of fixed staff overheads from the Government's educational budget. Private, public partnership could be looked at in this area where standards have to be closely monitored and could conveniently be carried out by the UGC. Virtuality once again is the key word where distance learning could be integrated into the main curricula of the universities.

- Saladin