29th Aug. 2006 Daily News (OGP)

Challenges and directions for universities

News_MISC_2006-14.pdf

Prof. Gunapala Nanayakkara

EDUCATION: People of this country, both tax payers and beneficiaries alike, want to know for sure, what contribution is being made by higher education to economic and social development of the nation.

I wish to address this question step by step, from problems through analysis and policy to programs of action. Let me first look into the long-term concerns of higher education, particularly the universities.

Our symposium is devoted to evolving a comprehensive Development Framework for Higher Education Sector which will cover both Universities and non-university tertiary sector or the vocational and skills development sector.

With the assistance of the World Bank, the Ministry of Education has already drafted the General Education System Development Framework whereas the work on the Higher Education sector is now begun. At a later stage of this process, when a set of strategies and policies is developed, we may seek the views of the relevant institutions, client groups, professions and the general public for alternatives/revisions to the proposals.

Visioning

All sectors and sub-systems should be driven by the power of a vision to be pursued. A vision for an organisation or a system of organisations is the collective expression of the will of the people concerning where they aspire to be in terms of their purpose and achievements in the future. It is the collective dream of their future state of affairs or where they want to be.

It is a dream that powers the engine of the organisation to drive according to its road-map, i.e. the mission that defines the milestones on the way to that dream.

A vision for an organisation must recognise its environment. The vision environment of our universities is the future economy of Sri Lanka. In developing a vision for higher education, one must envision the future economy that it is going to serve. Can Sri Lanka become a developed economy? The answer is "Yes," it can.

Becoming a developed economy does not necessarily mean ranking along with today's developed nations in terms of such measures as per capita income, per capita research outputs, per capita energy consumption, and the like.

But it does mean achieving income levels, innovative outputs, research and development, knowledge workers and service availability etc. at much higher levels than those targets given in numerous public documents and endorsed by mediocre bureaucrats.

Lessons from others

Japan presents an example of accelerated economic development. Its development change was deliberate, visible and inspirational. In many ways, Japan can be considered the case of technological applications executed through trading agencies, industry, laboratories, universities, financial institutions and government agencies in systematic coordination in order to realize a long-term vision of global economic presence of Japan. Japan's future development path is

charted, in terms of specific targets to achieve, as per analyses of expert opinions, in respect of key technology areas, viz., materials and processing, information and electronics, life sciences, and outer space. Should not we develop milestones for achievement in our priority areas, let us say, tourism and hospitality; agricultural products; mineral products; trading, financial and marine services and marketing knowledge capital?

Some time ago, I was in Nagoya, Japan, to study Japanese management and I had the opportunity to study at Muratech Corporation, a modern, global company of Japan in the telecommunication industry.

It employed nearly 35,000 employees, yet only a few hundreds are in production as other basic functions are automated and computer-aided. During my visits, I was first surprised to observe the minimal lighting provided in factories and warehouses of the company, and then, after a while, I realised that automated factories had only a few workers in designated locations and hence the factory operated in the dark!

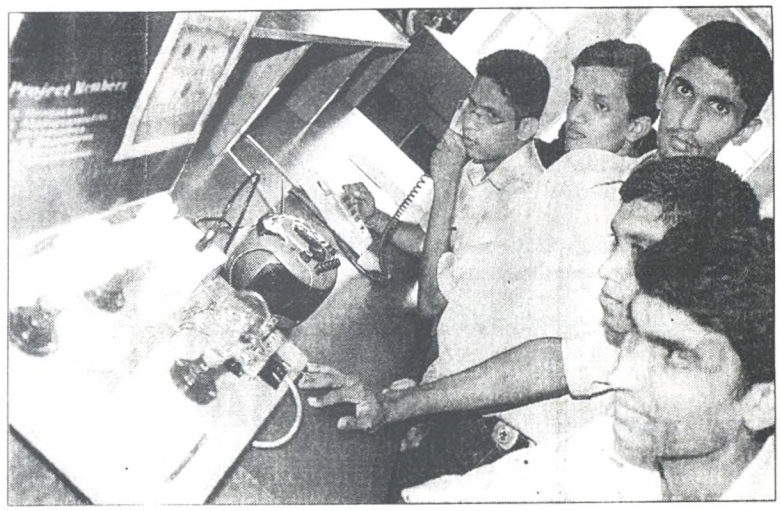
More enlightening was the fact that the company employed over seven hundred employees with doctoral degrees and most of them worked in company laboratories! Once a labour economy is now transformed into acknowledged economy and the universities are playing a key role. This is the difference between development and underdevelopment.

Being an underdeveloped economy, we do not employ persons with doctoral degrees for the production of value; our production systems, derived basically from the colonial patterns of trading functions, do not create demand for university graduates for productive work. Our employers would recruit a few graduates who have cosmetic attributes and skills such as English language and pleasant manners, basically to meet the frontline organisational requirements of their trading enterprises.

In contrast, the Japanese economy grew by creating value through scientific and technological breakthroughs in every spheres of work and this challenging process was directly supported by the universities. Japan's higher education focused on science and technology spheres and it cultivated analytical faculties, work values and national pride.

The trends

On the demand side, the number of employment opportunities will not dramatically increase to absorb the increases in supply. Since the complexity of business is not increasing, private sector jobs would rarely demand high level of knowledge and competencies that are often expected to come with university graduates.



At the lower levels of employment, a many employers expect potential employees to carry positive work values which the majority of job-seekers do not possess; (b) the lop-sided education system: The education system in Sri Lanka will continue to produce what I may call, 'uneducated' people through its irrational examinations system which is supported by the 'inhumane' private tuition system.

More and more resources would be diverted into this un-productive system in the hope that a system transformation would result from incremental reforms that are introduced in an ad-hoc manner; (c) colonization of productive systems including education: Many productive systems of the economy are likely to be dominated by foreign investors who are looking for cheaper sources of input supply.

Their investment decisions would make it difficult for the economy to re-structure itself and exercise a significant amount of autonomy that is needed to generate a demand for locally-educated youth. For example, foreign universities and educational institutions will continue to make inroads to the Sri Lanka's private education market, and extract surplus incomes by way of foreign exchange in lieu of poor-quality education wrapped in 'colonial' education certificates. These certificates would be the 'passports' to foreign labour markets or to the cosmopolitan business segments of the local economy; (d) pressure of the poor: As a result of increasing poverty and consequent dependence of the poor on governments, public sector activity has already become the activity for the poor: government hospitals have become healthcare centres for the poor (the rich attend private hospitals and clinics); and government universities have become education centres for the poor (the rich attend foreign universities either through local affiliates or by going overseas).

In recent years, the government has been spending around Rs. 10 billion annually to sustain a system of state universities which provides advanced education to over 60,000 students at a time.

Ground realities

While our vision for higher education takes off from the governing variables of the general economy and future forces as well as challenges, one needs to be serious about the ground realities of higher education at present.

To my mind, there are few main problem areas in higher education:

1. A large number of students qualify annually but the majority is unable to enter the universities for full-time study. The number qualifying is around 110,000 a year, whereas the annual intake is around 15,000 students (this year the number will be about 17,000 after allowing for the additional students entering based on revised marking);

2. Current universities do not have adequate facilities to cater to all. There are 15 universities, including the Open University of Sri Lanka which operates on the distance learning mode, eight undergraduate institutes and eight post-graduate institutes. Located in relatively difficult districts during the recent past, about half of these universities are not yet operating as full-fledged institutions.

3. Quality standards of university education and research are comparatively low. Judged in terms of the educational quality of teachers, research, teaching methods, learning resources etc. our universities as a system remains well below the general university standards of Asia.

4. Those who graduate from universities do not have suitable jobs.

Our Mission

Drafted upon a new environment of values and readiness, we should develop a strong and all-abiding mission for the system of higher educational institutions.

We need a mission that emphasizes "introduction of significant and timely improvements in the psychological, sociological and physical worlds of the university system so that the universities develop teachers, knowledge and the learning infrastructure resulting in new directions of education and research, and dramatic increases of the space for higher education while making the bridge between education and national development."