

Higher education in Sri Lanka at crossroads

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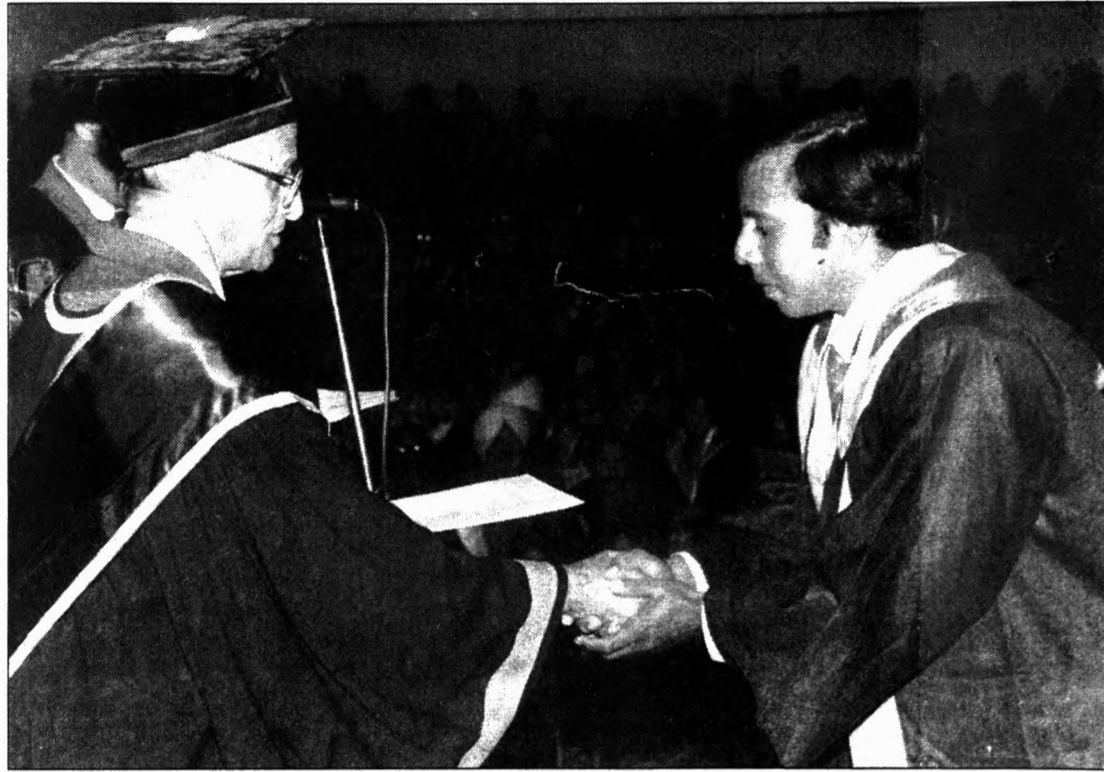
Excerpts of a presentation made after induction as a Fellow of the National Academy of Sciences of Sri Lanka.

It has been reported that in the 1800's, rich countries were only four times as rich as the poorest countries on the African continent and only two times as rich as most Asian countries, whereas in 2002, the rich countries of the world were 400 times richer than the poorest in the world and 10 times richer than most Asian countries. It has been clearly demonstrated that one of the main factors of economic growth in East Asia is its rapid growth and development in higher education. It is really frightening to look at the situation in another half a century or so, if this trend is allowed to continue. It is an undeniable fact that the rich countries advanced so fast because both education and higher education were recognized as important, even crucial facts for their advancement on the frontiers of knowledge. This statistic alone is enough for us to realize that we cannot sit back and enjoy the good life of the early 20th Century academic.

Today in the developed countries, 'brick' universities are turning into 'click' universities with the advent of computers and Internet. All students carry notebook computers and have access to Internet in wireless networks in the entire campus. Degree offerings have become very competitive. Universities are prepared to return tuition fees to their students, if the graduates cannot get a job at the market rates within six months after graduation. Medium of instruction in many universities is changing to English. Even in France there are degree programmes in English to attract International students. The Oxford University is offering MBA degrees and not the traditional MA or MPhil degrees to attract postgraduate students in Management. Quality Assurance and Accreditation has become very important as students look for quality and ranking before they select a university course. Some universities offer degrees valid for limited periods only, e.g. five years, in order to maintain quality. Graduates have to come back and do a few more courses to improve and update their knowledge, in order to retain their Degree.

While many changes are happening in the rest of the world, higher education in most Universities in Sri Lanka is continuing in the same old-fashioned way as in the 20th century.

At the local GCE /AL Examination conducted in April 2004, 105,000 students qualified for admission to universities, and public universities enrolled less than 15,000 students out of them. It is estimated that a total



Economic growth in Sri Lanka depends on higher education.

of about 70,000 students are enrolled in public universities and higher technical institutes in Sri Lanka.

Higher education is becoming increasingly important for Sri Lankan parents and students. Parents with the capacity to choose are increasingly unwilling to send their children to public universities in Sri Lanka and seek overseas educational opportunities or local private higher educational opportunities. It is no longer the higher echelons of society that are sending their children to study abroad. There is an emerging middle class, which is striving to give their children an educational advantage. While parents and students value higher education, they are far from happy with what is offered by Sri Lankan universities, with some exceptions like medicine and engineering programmes. It is estimated that over 1000 students qualify from the GCE/AL (London) Examinations annually. Over 120,000 students have been enrolled in private higher educational institutes and professional associations. In 2003, nearly 5000 students went overseas for higher education spending over Rs. 3,000 million a year. When interviewing these students and parents, to find out the reasons for sending them abroad, the common factors seem to be the certainty of graduation after a known time period, getting better employment opportunities and recognition by employers, and expected higher salaries.

Public universities in Sri Lanka receive a direct grant from the government. Any organisation that depends so much on public funding has a responsibility for public accountability. The public has the right to know whether the quality offered and relevance of programmes meets their demands.

Educationists have held the

view that university students should be given a broad and sound education, to become intellectuals who would fit into the society when they graduate, rather than training in specific skills. However, when students embark on higher education, the aspiration of both students and parents is to ensure that the end result will be lucrative employment and job security in the organised sectors of the national economy. This can only be possible if the student possesses the specific training in skills, knowledge and attitudes that the employers look for, at the time of leaving the university. This is the challenge facing university academics today.

Competition for funding

The era where the monarch had the right to claim all the country's wealth has been long gone. Sri Lanka being a democratic country, the government has to pay attention to a wide spectrum of public interests from health, basic education, poverty alleviation, infrastructure, security, defence to higher education, research and development etc., while the major part of the wealth of the country is distributed (inequitably) among its 20 million people. In such a context, government's resources will never be adequate, and the chances are that less priority will be given to higher education as it has to compete with top priorities like defence, poverty alleviation and health services.

At present, basic education and higher education belong to one Ministry in Sri Lanka, both being funded by the Ministry's Block Vote. Analyses have shown that, considering return on investment, basic education is under-funded and higher education is over-funded from the block grant given to the Ministry by the government. Socio-economists have shown that there are more social benefits

with the investments in basic education compared to higher education, which mostly bring private benefits for the individuals. This is the reason why parents who have the capacity to pay for children's higher education do not hesitate to send them abroad at high costs. Government funding at basic education levels also addresses the problems of equity in a better manner when compared to higher education. Therefore, even though it is well accepted that the country needs to invest heavily on higher education in order to achieve economic growth, the higher education authorities will face increasing difficulties to get more funds to the public universities.

The way forward

Sri Lankan higher education is at crossroads. If we are complacent and let things go on the way they used to, we'll soon be on the path of no return, where the gap between the developed countries and even the developing countries and us will keep on increasing, with no hope for ever catching up. If we need economic growth in the country there is only one way; viz higher education reforms to improve accessibility, quality, relevance, efficiency and effectiveness of higher education.

Public universities in Sri Lanka are relatively large, have a powerful lobby, with a bright but militant group of students. When there is no clear career path for the student who enters the university, they can be easily misled, and made the pawns of those who are interested in creating disruption and disharmony in the country. We all know what happens when bright people are misdirected. The disrupted education programs frustrate the students more, and lead to rejection of the public universities by the society, inducing more and more of the bright children from families

who can afford, to seek other seats of higher learning. Eventually the public universities would become the place for the less bright and less well-to-do students. This is already happening in the country and if we do not adapt ourselves to the changing world we are sure to be doomed. We can bury our heads like the ostrich and ignore what is happening in the rest of the world or walk like a tortoise at a slow pace saying that we are reforming higher education in Sri Lanka, but this scenario can be sustained only for a short period of time. Therefore we need to act fast and carry out major reforms in higher education in Sri Lanka to modernize them and keep our education on par with the rest of the World.

Running universities that suit a competitive environment requires some uncomfortable changes. Public universities need not, in fact should not be privatised. However, private universities do have a role to play in higher education. They should exist side by side with the public universities, like in most other countries, including our neighbouring countries India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Indonesia and Malaysia. It does not mean that universities should be run like corporate bodies. Most universities in the world are fee levying but non-profit making entities. In such an environment academic staff can teach, think and learn. If such universities are well managed, there is no risk of losing the ethos, which has given universities their character and value.

We have only limited options available. We have to make higher education in Sri Lanka economically viable, globally competitive and market oriented. These goals can be achieved only by policy reforms. Funding the universities based on performance measured on the basis of student numbers, quality and employability of graduates, income generation etc. will motivate the academics to be more sensitive to the national needs.

Universities have to 'earn' their funds rather than some authority 'giving' grants to universities. Competitive funding for undergraduate quality improvements, research etc. will facilitate this paradigm shift. Academics should be proud to earn funds through competition. Well performing university staff (academic and non-academic) should be well rewarded.

We do not need to reinvent the wheel. We can introduce the good practices in newly emerging universities in the rest of the world to Sri Lankan universities as well. If we can get on the correct track, and move fast enough, with the bright and motivated students that we get in our universities, we can hope for a much brighter future for higher education in Sri Lanka.