

Universities not gearing students for the much-needed job market

By Manel Abhayaratna

The Advanced Level Results will be released in a few months time. Students who have successfully obtained the necessary aggregates will be busy filling in application forms to enter the Universities. Those finally chosen will enter with trepidation the halls of higher learning not sure how brutally they will be ragged or what the future holds for them.

The authorities by quirks of fancy or maybe by a process of laborious deduction will send students whose home town is in Kandy to Universities in Ruhuna or Sabaragamuwa, making their lives much more difficult and exposing them not only to the risk of more intensified ragging but also greater expenses as student will have to live away from their homes.

Students who went through the drudgery of school bells, confined spaces, hard chairs and heavy bags filled with innumerable books and long study hours and hours looking towards that utopia of a university education find soon that schools have been replaced by the repeated routine of notes, large numbers at lectures and very little personal rapport between the lecturers and the students. The Universities are often no better than the schools churning out numbers of university qualified students whose education and knowledge has little relevance in the employment market.

The universities offer degrees in numerous disciplines, but though the titles of such degrees are high sounding and appear profound, the optimistic student who enters the University with wide eyed expectations soon finds that while internal political parties oriented

in the completion of the courses, the final results too are not the open sesame for career oriented professions.

Most of the students who enter the University are from middle class or lower middle class families, most of them are from rural schools (since entrance to the university is yet governed by the standardization of marks) and often parents have made tremendous sacrifices to provide their children with the privilege of obtaining a university education.

The universities have not geared themselves to providing a holistic education, often it provides a subject education, and with large numbers opting to follow degrees in popular subjects like economics, students are often given copious notes and very little time is spent on analysis or in providing the student with tools for a deeper understanding or research. Furthermore, lack of knowledge of the English language acts as a barrier both in studies and later in obtaining a job. We find graduates to whom University education has just been a waste of time and parental resources. A young graduate from the North Central province who obtained a degree in geography desperately searched for a job, but no private company wanted his specialized knowledge and finally in desperation, in order to pay off a loan his parents had incurred to send him to campus, decided that it was at least economically sound to buy bulk tea, packet it and sell it to the boutiques and tea shops in his village. What a comedown from his great expectations? Today, one can see at least the frustration and the unhappiness of the faces of the young students who arrive at the BMICH to obtain their convocation. Many of them have already realized that

Relevant educational policy: The need of the hour

Education it has been said is the life blood of a nation providing the young with training to be disciplined and knowledgeable. However if one takes the dismal statistics of the pre 'O' level school drop-outs and the results of the GCE Ordinary Level Examination which is considered to be a basic qualification needed, one will realize that the education system in the country, especially in recent times does not appear to be attuned to reach any lofty ideal.

The young are neither disciplined nor do they possess any value education and their knowledge of basic facts is minimal. This is certainly a sad situation in a country that yet boasts of a high level of literacy. The ability to read and sign your name is certainly no criteria of the level of a person's education!

The tragedy that has affected our education system is due mainly to political interference and political pressure to formulate educational policies which had no relevance to the needs of the country and its development but were used to boost the image of a politico or a political party.

This interference started with the introduction of the mother tongue as the medium of instruction. The right of the parent to decide the language in which a child should study was superseded by state directives. Altruistic reasons were forwarded both for this and for the standardization of marks for university entrance, stating that an equalization of society would

occur by these decision, but the reality was quite different. The gap between the haves and the have-nots widened, with those who had access to learning here or abroad in the English media obtaining a distinct advantage over the Swabasha educated.

The next aspect of political interference occurred when assisted schools were taken over. Perhaps, at that time the government was confident that they would have the financial, managerial and other resources needed to run the schools.

They never visualized an era when a free market economy would reduce government resources nor did they realize that to educate a generation of youngsters needed more than administrative and managerial skills.

The dedication and the commitment that had existed in the earlier school system was lost as teaching became not a vocation but a job. In fact under the earlier system the present rush for prestige's schools did not take place, for parents were confident that their children would be given the best education possible, even though, the school was not in a city suburb. Today, some of the schools that were taken over have been divested or closed due to lack of students and teachers.

The government is often unable to bear the cost of maintenance and parents are prevailed upon to provide the materials needed to maintain the school buildings. In some schools admission to the school is de-

pendent on the ability of a child to bring a desk and chair!

Occasionally, education authorities awoke to the fact that education should also be employment related. In the 1970's vocational subjects ostensibly to prepare a child for employment, was introduced as a compulsory subject for the National Certificate of Education. Unfortunately, while the idea may have visualized employment possibilities the reality was totally different.

A child who was taught batik printing in one school and had due to a parent's transfer or residence change, to go to another school in a different town or province found that the craft taught there was something quite different. In fact even schools within a same town taught different vocational subjects.

The pundits who had insisted that such vocational teaching would provide job opportunities never had any comprehension of the realities! However, within a couple of years this concept of vocational training was dropped when the cluster school system was introduced but that again died a natural death, for those who had recommended this scheme had not taken into account our cultural ethos which is that we are unable to share equally anything, whether it be of value or not! Hilarious situations too occurred when the blue eyed dreamers of educational policy wanted to impress on a jaded public their notions of equality in education, such as deciding that Provincial schools would be distinguished if they only were named differently and titled with the names of prestigious colleges in Colombo, unfortunately such a metamorphosis has yet to occur!

The substance of education too has undergone drastic change. Syllabuses were changed at the whim and fancy of education pundits who had received their training abroad. No consideration was given to the child's ability and capacity. Contents of subjects and syllabuses are changed willy-nilly. Many of those of an older generation would remember when syllabuses were designed to provide an 'O' level child with a more detailed knowledge of subjects learnt in Grade 6. Syllabuses were expanded to give a child a wider and more comprehensive knowledge of what had been learnt in a rudimentary manner in the lower grades.

Children's minds were attuned to gaining such knowledge through a gradual process of repetition and expansion, unlike what takes place with the hop-scotch syllabuses of today. Children now are burdened with details and trivia that are too much for their minds to grasp let alone retain, and teachers hard pressed to cover the syllabus rushes through it, in a classroom of over forty students.

It is extremely doubtful whether even a single student is able to comprehend clearly the subject matter, naturally, parents are compelled to provide tuition and the weary child already confused, arrives home loaded with homework, to a tutor who tries to unravel mysteries of subjects that the child has often mentally rejected.

Education authorities should consider the failures at the O Level Examination and the large number of school drop-outs at pre-'O' level and instead of passing the buck and talking of poor teaching methods they should seek the assistance of experienced principals, senior school teachers and concerned educationalist and set up syllabuses which are suited for the sixteen-year olds who are sitting for their first public examination. Question papers should be set to find out what the child knows, not as usually happens what he does not know.

Educationalist should realize that the 'O' level examination is the basic qualifying examination for any youngster, it should provide the motivation to obtain greater skills and qualifications, but if a child, as happens today has to spend hours trying to understand subject-content based on syllabuses which are too vast and complicated, his interest and enthusiasm will soon wane and the privilege of obtaining education qualifications will be weighted on the side of the elite who can afford tutors or send their children to international schools.

It is time that the educational authorities, sans political interference, formulated a long term education policy suited for the needs of the country taking into consideration the learning capacity of the student and the relevance of such education to economic development.

about 27 years.

When he goes through the exercise of sitting for the qualifying examination and then reads for his Masters, he ultimately qualifies when he is in his early thirties. By that time students who have obtained qualifications abroad since usually there is no waiting time between the first degree and registering for the Masters, have already qualified and obtained jobs in the private sector which today appear to require higher qualifications than a mere degree and also has lowered the age limit for applications.

University education has to be revamped to suit the needs of the country. It has also to achieve the broader educational aims of preparing youth to make their gifted personal contributions for the betterment of the country. If our society is to progress and improve the youth have to question and appraise with the knowledge they gain in the universities value judgments and accepted norms. They must have the knowledge to move beyond the narrow confines of their upbringing, evaluating the patterns and systems that formed them and deciding on what to accept and what to reject. Unfortunately, the present system of University education does not appear to have provided this aspect of university education and instead it provides academic disciplines that have very little relevance to the economic and moral reality of the times. The starry-eyed gifted students who enter the University gradually lose their belief 'that education maketh the man' as they see the baser side of human nature displayed in the ragging that they are subjected to, and after all that trauma they end up with an certificate that does not lead to the realization of their dreams and hopes.