

University education – then and now

Prof Kusuma Karunaratne

Professor Emeritus, University of Colombo

As we are all aware, a university is an institution engaged in higher education and research with powers to grant degrees at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

The word 'University' has its origin from Latin (*Universitas magistrorum et scholarium*) having the meaning 'an association or community of teachers and scholars'.

Though there were early institutions of learning, mainly religious schools both in the east and west, such as Nālanda (5th – 12th century AD), the first university in the western world was the University of Bologna established in 1088 followed by University of Paris (1096) and University of Oxford (1096) which developed rapidly from the year 1167 when the King at the time (Henry the II) banned English students from attending the famous University of Paris.

The second oldest University in England was the University of Cambridge formed by scholars who left the University of Oxford over a dispute in 1209 when the Oxford University was closed temporarily for the town execution of two scholars. As such, University of Cambridge has been a traditional rival of University of Oxford and of course, they are rivals today in the sphere of sports. University of Cambridge is now ranked, one of the top five Universities in the world and the best ranking in Europe. (It has produced 85 Nobel Laureates).

Today, the University is a world-wide phenomenon. Practically every country in the world has its own university or universities, ranging from one to over a thousand with on-campus student population ranging from a few thousand to over fifty thousand, e.g., in the United States. Universities today, have formed into associations of over 1000 universities encompassing many countries. We are aware of the Association of Commonwealth Universities and the International Association of Universities mainly because our universities hold membership of such associations and further we recognize and accredit a degree from a University if the University is a member of such associations.

As of now, many universities have similar objectives mostly by convention. The most common objectives of a university can be listed as follows:

- pursuit, promotion and dissemination of knowledge
- pursuit of research

- provision of intellectual leadership
- manpower development
- promotion of social, cultural and economic modernization
- promotion of international understanding

Universities, whether be state sector or private, value and want to protect the autonomy of the institution. Many a publication stresses the importance of autonomy of the university. With reference to autonomy, I wish to quote a paragraph embodied in a publication titled, "History of the University of Moratuwa, 1972-1997"

"No government has a monopoly of wisdom, inventiveness and effectiveness in higher education and the government should not deny the society, the benefits of the initiative of perhaps the largest body of intellectuals. It has been often proved that imagination, thought, commitment to intellectual excellence and dedication thrive best when governmental supervision and regulations are relaxed. A University which is a mere tool or a department of the government ceases to be a university. A university must not only serve but must also challenge through critical and independent thought, the orthodoxies of the moment."

"No further argument seems to be necessary to show that the aims of a university are best fulfilled in a society where the practitioners of higher education are given the intellectual and academic freedom to design their own experiments and programmes and execute them with the financial and social framework which is imposed on them by the society which maintains them and is eventually expected to be served by them."

University Education in Ceylon / Sri Lanka

As far back as mid-nineteenth century, there had been agitation in the country for the establishment of a university to provide higher education for the deserving youth of our country. This agitation intensified by the beginning of the 20th century especially with the formation of the Ceylon University Association by a group of western educated elite in 1906.

Owing to the continued demand, in the year 1911, a committee was appointed by the government to report on the secondary and higher education in the country and this committee recommended the establishment of a University College. This recommendation however,

was rejected by the Secretary of State for the Colonies. After a lapse of four years, in 1915, the Secretary of State sanctioned the establishment of the University College and this was to be affiliated to the University of Oxford. The intervening war years delayed the establishment of the College and it is only in 1921 that the Ceylon University College was established in Colombo, in the building that was originally the main building of Royal College located on Thurstan Road opposite College House, formally the Regina Walawwa which is presently the administration building of the University of Colombo.

The recommended affiliation to the University of Oxford never materialized and instead, the College was affiliated to the University of London.

By 1924, plans had been made and funds voted to convert the Ceylon University College to a full-fledged university, but controversies as to its location and type (whether it was to be residential or otherwise) caused inordinate delays and it was only after a lapse of 18 years, i.e. in 1942 that the University of Ceylon was established incorporating the University College and the Ceylon Medical College with Faculties of Oriental Studies, Arts, Science and Medicine.

The Faculties were headed by important personalities in our country such as Professor Gunapala Piyasena Malalasekera, Sir Nicholas Attygalle, Professor EFC Ludowyke all headed by the Vice Chancellor, Sir Ivor Jennings, Some of the students who entered the first year were also colourful personalities such as Ronnie de Mel, Nissanka Wijeratne etc.

The siting of the University of Colombo was an interim measure as the decision had been to have the University of Ceylon as a residential university located at Peradeniya. Much deliberation had gone in to the siting of the University and Peradeniya was selected from the three proposed sites, viz. Colombo, Dumbara Valley and Peradeniya. With the development of infrastructure at Peradeniya, faculties were moved to Peradeniya between 1949 to 1964, fortunately the Science Faculty in Colombo was not dismantled.

Peradeniya with its serene landscape, fine buildings of traditional design, and aesthetic qualities was a fine and pleasing campus for students and staff to pursue study, teaching and research. Students' hostels provided comfortable accommodation, wholesome meals and an environment conducive for studies. At least, at that stage, the country could be proud of its university.

With time, there were changes in the University system. Some Faculties were moved to Peradeniya in 1949, the Engineering Faculty was established at the University of Ceylon, Colombo. With the retirement of Sir Ivor Jennings as Vice Chancellor, Sir Nicholas Attygalle headed the University as Vice Chancellor in 1954.

The western type elitist structure of the University saw a change in the late fifties with the establishment of the two universities, the Vidyodaya University and the Vidyalandara University, which were earlier monastic type institutions of higher learning. The medium of instruction in these two universities was mainly Sinhala. The emphasis more on religious studies, arts, culture etc. was significant. Student base too was different, being rural and traditional as compared with the more westernized students of the University of Ceylon.

Student numbers increased gradually but something unusual occurred in 1963, where an unusually large number of students were taken in and accommodated in Colombo. It was rumored that the son of a VVIP had to be accommodated and all students who scored marks above him got the opportunity to enter the university in that year. The Grand Stand of the former race course across Reid Avenue was commissioned to accommodate nearly 600 students mainly in Arts which earned the name of Ashwa Vidyalaya to rhyme with Vishva Vidyalaya. Many feared that such ill-planned increase of admission could lead to degeneration in standards.

A further re-structuring of the university system took place in 1966, the creation of the National Council of Higher Education and in 1967 the University of Ceylon Peradeniya and University of Ceylon, Colombo were made separate universities making four universities with Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Universities.

This structure again had to undergo change due to the island-wide insurgency and in 1972, again a single University was created with five campuses namely Peradeniya, Colombo, Vidyodaya, Vidyalandara and Katubedda. The Katubedda campus was the former Ceylon College of Technology established to turn out more practical engineers. This situation too changed just after six years and in 1978, a new Universities Act created separate universities from 1st January 1979 and with time, more universities were created and student numbers increased for good reason or otherwise.

University Students

As was said earlier, during the time of establishment of the University, most students came from elitist families from cities and suburbs. Higher Education then was not the forte of the ordinary citizens. The University was elitist, unknown and inaccessible to ordinary people. They did not know the value of education so much. This situation changed with time as the student population grew and students from middle class families with English education, entered Medical, Engineering and Science Faculties. Their strength was their knowledge in science and not so much of their family background. Also, larger number of students of similar background entered the Faculties of Arts.

With the change of government in 1956 and the establishment of Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara Universities, in late fifties, more and more students with education in Sinhala medium started entering the Universities. The output of the Central School System too, found their way to the university. The change of medium from English to Sinhala, the lack of emphasis on English education in schools and the entry of larger numbers of students mainly to the Faculties of Arts, affected the quality of graduates passing out. With time, many a graduate in Arts competent only in Sinhala or Tamil failed to find reasonable employment as their skills were found wanting.

Even with graduate unemployment looming, there was great pressure on the universities to increase the intake. This became a political issue as well, when the government introduced the 'district quota' system in the mid-seventies for student entry to universities.

The 'district quota' system ensured that, "best of students from each district were given places in the university as a ratio of the population of the district". This was evolved as the government could not ensure equal educational resources to every district. It was also on the basis that, "best of students from each district will come to similar level of fruition when given equal opportunity".

With this system, students from districts like Badulla, Monaragala, Vavuniya, Mulativu etc. could enter the university with lower scores than students from Colombo or Jaffna. This is because the latter districts had excellent educational resources as compared with that of the former.

The Tamil politicians at that time took this up as a political issue, that the 'district quota' system is a method to deny university places to students from Jaffna. The fallacy of this is seen when one considers the situation today. Presently, students from Jaffna can enter the Universities for the popular courses such as Medicine, Engineering and Physical Science with less scores than students from Colombo.

	Colombo	Jaffna
Medicine	1.9671	1.7434
Engineering	1.9170	1.8822
Physical science	1.1509	0.9711

Example: University entry Z score cut off marks 2009/2010

With the improvement of the secondary education facilities even more students wanted to enter universities. Sometimes, universities were required to take in more students than they can afford to have, considering the facilities. Presently, some universities are 'overflowing' with students stretching their facilities to near breaking point. Student problems affect the smooth running of universities, some problems being genuine and some

artificially created by interested groups.

Some of the reasons for student problems can be listed as follows:

- artificially created by politically affiliated groups to serve their own end
- insufficient hostel and other facilities
- ragging
- on-going rivalry between student groups
- economic and other reasons

Ragging had been a recurring problem in the universities. This originated as a form of inducting new students to university but with time it turned out to be so ugly and disruptive that some universities had to be closed.

In certain instances, when those involved in ragging were brought to the Vice Chancellor, they denied that they have taken part in ragging as there was no proper definition for ragging. It is interesting that one Vice Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa had publicized and displayed a notice which defined what is meant by ragging. It goes as follows:

"Ragging is defined as any action taken or situation created to produce mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment or ridicule. Such activities and situations include, but are not limited to, assault in any form; creation of excessive fatigue, physical and psychological shocks, road trips, quests, treasure or scavenger hunts outside of university-owned or within university-controlled property; wearing apparel which is conspicuous and not normally considered in good taste publicly; engaging in public stunts and buffoonery; morally degrading or humiliating games and activities or any other activity which would degrade or otherwise compromise the dignity of the individual, including forced use and abuse of alcohol and drugs."

Though students from rural regions were given some concession to enter the University as described earlier by the district quota system, they suffered numerous disabilities in the university. Most of these students have gained entry to the Arts Faculties as the highest percentage of students entering the university is in that field. They lack sufficient knowledge in English to benefit from university education. They lack sufficient parental funds to secure wholesome accommodation in the cities and locations where their universities are sited. Sometimes, their rural values were scoffed at by other students causing ridicule.

Several steps have been taken to reduce these hardships. It was Mr. Lalith Athulathmudali who laid the foundation to address the problem of economic hardship of rural students who enter the university. The Mahapola Scholarship Scheme originated by him was the greatest help to such students even without burdening the government coffers. Over the last four decades more than fifty percent of

the university students were provided with Mahapola Scholarships and the rural poor students were the ones who benefitted most from this scheme. It is painful to see some posters within university premises with slogans written such as, "Mahapola Scholarship is our due right". Students who put up such posters are either ignorant or do not seem to appreciate the vision and benevolence of that great individual who originated this scheme.

Government too has provided hostel facilities at extremely low rent, almost free, in the vicinity of the universities which have been a boon to the rural students. Students too, especially the females have taken measures to obliterate their rural look by donning tight denim trousers and short T shirts within a few months or an year of stay at the university so that they can merge with others, without being identified as a rural student.

I have heard one Professor from a university say, jokingly or otherwise that, "the denim trouser is a legacy of the Americans towards mankind." He says that it is the only garment which increases in value with use, whereas all other garments depreciate over time. The denim trouser appreciates with time. He says that such a trouser with abrasion after use looks more valuable than when it was new. In fact, there are laundries in New York and other places where denims can be 'stone washed' to give that more valuable look. Further, he says that two or three denim trousers will be adequate to last a whole university life.

Jokes apart, the denim trouser worn by many a student male and female has brought some sort of equality and has obliterated the divide between rural and urban students.

You might wonder why I harp so much about rural students in the university. It is because that they are the most disadvantaged in comparison. They enter the Arts Faculty mostly and on graduation, they are the ones who find it hardest to secure employment. It is the parents of such students who make the most sacrifice to get their offspring a university education and at the end, they are the ones who get most disillusioned.

Graduate unemployment is a serious matter for them and in the first few years of this century, no graduates were employed as the government at the time planned to shrink employment in the government sector. However, now there is a concerted effort by the government to provide employment to unemployed graduates whether it is for a useful purpose or not. Whatever it is, it is a great relief for these graduates.

Over the years, the quality of university education has dwindled except in the practical areas such as engineering, medicine and architecture. There was a time that the country's economy was neither strong, nor diversified to absorb graduates for employment. This picture is

now changed and there are more opportunities for employments. Thousands of jobs are advertised mainly in the private sector but the graduates do not possess the skills required and some graduates are hell bent on looking for jobs as teachers or even as clerks in the government.

The cause of degeneration of the quality of graduates cannot be attributed solely to the graduates. There are several reasons for this malady. The removal of emphasis on English education for nearly a half century in the country is one of the main reasons. Fluency in English to benefit from a plethora of resources available in English is a sine qua non to every university student. In the early days those specializing in Physics, Chemistry etc. had to know French or German in addition to English to graduate.

The exodus of academic staff due to political or other reasons and mediocrity and lack of commitment to teaching and research are other factors which have contributed to the degeneration of quality.

When an individual by the name of Deegajanu approached the Buddha to find out what is conducive to a happy life in this world, the requirements the Buddha emphasized are that one must be skilled in a profession and he must carry out his profession efficiently, energetically and enthusiastically.

When Dr. Sumanadasa, Vice Chancellor of the single University sent a circular specifying norms of work for university lecturers and Professors, there was a host of protests from some quarters despite the fact they were the work norms of teachers in certain campuses in the country and are very similar to work norms adopted in quite some foreign universities.

Lack of commitment to teaching and research by the teacher certainly affects the quality of the graduate. The teachers have their own problems such as insufficient pay, (which has now been corrected) lack of facilities and opportunities for their own children to enter good schools where proper education is imparted, difficulties in transport (this too has now been corrected) and as such they could not give their full commitment to university teaching. Frequent closure of the university due to parochial and political problems of the country, insurgency and the thirty year old war certainly added to the woes which affected the quality of graduates.

The mass education within the university especially in Arts, Commerce and Social Sciences, the semester system and accumulation of credits in order to graduate, the concept that there should be a reasonable percentage of passes are other factors that have contributed to the degeneration.

In the earlier days, students had to pass all subjects of an examination at one and the same time for each part of the degree. Failure in one subject lead to failure of the examination and the student was compelled to study all subjects again and pass all subjects at one and the same

sitting. With such rigorous requirements, naturally the quality of the graduate was high. When this academic rigidity was removed there was a natural decline in standards. This is true not only for us but some other countries as well. It has been reported that more than fifty percent of all graduates in a neighboring country are unemployable. A professor from that country once said that eighty percent are unemployable there. Whether this is true or not, it shows the magnitude of unemployability of graduates in our region.

The UGC and the universities in Sri Lanka have recognized the dwindling standards of graduates and have taken certain measures to ensure good quality of our graduates. The IRQUE project to study and take necessary action to improve the quality of graduates has given rise to a Council for quality assurance and it is expected that the quality will improve with time.

There are other reasons to compel the local universities to improve their quality, one being the private sector involvement in higher education. There are a few degree awarding institutes that have been accredited for the award of degrees and a large number of BOI companies that have received recognition and accreditation from foreign universities to conduct their degree programmes in Sri Lanka. Quite naturally, all these degree programmes are conducted using the English medium and the students who enroll have a fair knowledge of the language as they are compelled to study, do assignments and make presentations using English as the medium. It is assessed that about twenty percent of the total intake to the State Universities enroll in these private Institutes and the graduating numbers will also be in that range. These graduates will pose a further challenge to local State University graduates in the field of employment. Further, the foreign university undergraduates in these private institutes will have to depend on information technology (IT) as some study materials are available on-line via internet. Sometimes, they have on-line examinations and communication with parent university and as such, their IT literacy is at a higher level. This too is a challenge to local universities.

These have spurred local universities to emphasise on English and IT within their courses of study and this healthy change will certainly be a factor in the improvement of the quality of the local graduate.

Government has taken several measures in the recent past to alleviate the problems of university staff by improving their salaries considerably, providing them concessions to purchase vehicles and also providing liberal opportunities to travel to other universities abroad in furtherance of their studies and research. The strict rules imposed on university academic staff for leave and travel have been greatly eased. Government has also provided vast amount of funds to improve the physical infrastructure of universities and in the diversification of study programmes,

commencement of postgraduate study programmes with incentives provided to academic staff, provided facilities for the use of Internet and IT and it is believed that these measures will certainly improve the quality of our local graduates with time.

As stated earlier, the percentage of the student population in our universities is inadequate in comparison to that of western and developed countries. If we are striving to be an education hub in the region, as decided by government policy, our universities have the responsibility to produce high quality employable graduates acceptable both locally and globally. Our student population in both state universities and private institutes must be doubled in the near term and five times ultimately.

We should be able to attract high fee-paying foreign students by offering internationally acceptable degrees. Both UK and Australia earn a fair percentage of their budget by way of fees levied on foreign students.

The gloom we had about our university education sometime back is now easing off. With the facilities provided by the government and the healthy competition provided by the private sector, we can certainly see a bright future for our universities, university education and university graduates.

There is an increasing trend in the world to provide tertiary level education on-line via Internet. Today, the Internet has become a vital resource in higher education. With the limitation of physical resources in universities, on-line higher education will become increasingly important to satisfy the educational needs of increasing number of students globally. There are some visionaries who predict that the entire university education structure will ultimately be replaced by a Digital Global Learning Infrastructure (DGLI) where all learning resources, teaching/learning process, examination, evaluation and certification will all be done via Internet. This I hope is only a dream especially to us who have spent nearly four decades of our life in the so-called red-brick universities, here and abroad.

We, as a nation, have treasured knowledge more than anything else and as such, no one needs to instill in us the value of education and knowledge. The mottos of some of our universities bear testimony to this fact. "Vidyaiwa Sarwadhanam" meaning, 'Wisdom is all wealth' and "Vidvān Sarvatra Bhrājathe" meaning, 'the one with wisdom shines everywhere'.

I wish to conclude my address with the well-known poem.

නිබ්බ නැහැක සොර සතුරන් ගත	නොහෙනා
ඵසැඩි මනාවන් චතුරන් චල	නොහෙනා
කෝප චුචන් රජ මැතිඳුන් ගත	නොහෙනා
උගනමනා ශිල්පයමයි මතු	රැකෙනා

Thank you.