



Reforms in University Education

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In a report entitled Higher Education in Sri Lanka published in its issue of April 1983, the Economic Review made an exhaustive review of University Education in Sri Lanka, against the backdrop of its historical development, the social milieu and political imperatives. In essence, the tenor of that report was that, by and large, the University system had, at that time, failed to serve adequately, intellectual development, the higher levels of human resource needs and the demands of national advancement and development. As happens so often in this country, that report, too, shared the fate of many others before it that dealt with a multiplicity of national issues. Perhaps, it was read by most members of the target audience, debated by a few but soon forgotten by all and consigned to the limbo. The University system itself continued its slide downhill, unabated.

Realising that all aspects of education required focused and co-ordinated attention at the National level, the Government of the day, in 1991, established the National Education Commission. The mandate of this Commission was to advise the President on all matters connected with the entire spectrum of education and help to evolve National Policies, in respect of the major sectors. Accordingly, the Commission developed, in addition to other Policy documents, a National Policy on University Education.

Much thought, work, debate and discussion preceded the formulation

of this policy document. Views were sought from a wide spectrum of intellectuals and academics and from leaders in the private and public sectors. Seminars and public hearings, written and oral representations, all formed part of the strategy for gathering data and inputs that would serve as the basis for formulation of sound policy initiatives. Obviously, this process took time. The National Policy on University Education was finally presented to H E The President in 1996.

Having accepted the Policy in principle, HE, the President appointed a Presidential Task Force on University Education which was directed to develop an Implementation Programme with clearly identified goals and specific actions for implementation, fixing responsibility on identified authorities and agencies and stipulating time frames for implementation of the various reforms. The Task Force was headed by the Hon. Richard Pathirana, Minister for Education and Higher Education and included, Dr. Tara De Mel, Advisor to HE on Social Infrastructure, the Hon. Deputy Ministers of Education and Higher Education, and the Hon. Minister of Cultural Affairs, all Vice-Chancellors, Secretary /MEHE and Officers of the National Education Commission.

The Presidential Task Force carried out its assignment through 9 Technical Committees, the reports of which were collated by, Vice-Chairman, Planning of the National Education Commission, Dr. K. D. Arulpragasam.

In this manner, an Implementation Plan for Reforms in University Education

was developed in Executive Summary form and discussed by the Presidential Task Force. It was considered essential by the Task Force that any University Reform document must seek the widest possible consensus in the University community. Therefore, it was decided to open it for discussion at all levels in all Universities, through the Vice-Chancellors and the various University authorities. Though such a procedure was necessarily time consuming, it was nevertheless essential. As expected many comments, suggestions and criticisms were received, analysed and the final document that evolved gave due consideration to the views expressed.

The Executive Summary formulated as above was presented for consideration of Her Excellency by the Presidential Task Force. The document was accepted and HE directed that steps be taken for implementation. A Committee headed by the Chairman, University Grants Commission and including Chairman, NEC and some of the Vice-Chancellors has been entrusted with responsibility of ensuring the process of implementation. It will be evident from the procedure followed that the reforms that are being implemented have the consensus of the entire University Community. These are the reforms that are outlined below.

Curricula, Course structure and Examinations.

It has been evident for some time that curricula and courses are outmoded and have not kept pace with advances and changes taking place in the world of academia. Neither do they satisfy national needs nor the demands of an expanding population of youth clamouring for places in the University system. In recent years, the numbers of graduates joining the ranks of the unemployed, nay unemployable graduates, has been increasing,





inexorably. The reasons, basically, have been two-fold.

- a) The extreme rigidity of subjects and subject combinations, themselves loaded with material irrelevant in the modern and future context.
- b) The reluctance or failure on the part of the curriculum designers and Faculties to break new ground and launch out in new directions, which relate academic learning to the diverse needs of an expanding economy.

The problem is easily illustrated. Rigid subject combinations have remained unchanged for all of 50 years. When I was an undergraduate, myself, the Biological Science combination was Botany, Chemistry and Zoology. It still is. Where we once had the single University of Ceylon producing a handful of graduates, with this combination and job openings into which they could move were available, we now have, say, 9 Universities producing 900 graduates a year, all more or less identical (some welcome breaks are beginning to appear) finding few suitable opportunities for employment.

The situation is even bleaker when one considers the cohorts of Arts graduates. In this case, at the point of entry into the University the path of least resistance is chosen – for instance, a Language (not English), Political Science and Logic and Scientific method or other such combination. In the University the easy way upwards is continued. A graduate emerges, on whom the state has made some investment. The end product is of little use either to himself or to the state. To make matters worse the graduate believes that it is the duty of the state to place him in employment commensurate with his status as a graduate.

Not surprisingly, similar problems are emerging with courses having a more professional bent. There is an annual output of around 400 graduates in Agriculture, all of who expect to find employment in the public sector and obviously cannot. After four years of education, at great expense to the state, they find themselves under-employed or unemployed. The annual output of doctors is around 800. They too have come to the realisation that employment in the state sector will not be automatic, in the foreseeable future. While it may be possible to increase the approved cadre that now exists, logic indicates that saturation level will be reached sooner than later and medical graduates would need to follow the path of entrepreneurship that is preached to their less fortunate fellow graduates in non professional streams.

The foregoing is the canvas against which it has been decided that drastic and far reaching changes have to be made in curricula, course structures, methods of assessment and nature of degrees awarded.

At subject level, curricula have to be rehashed, ringing out the old and ringing in the new. A core of academic content must be strengthened by material that is of current practical relevance, catering as appropriate to social and national needs. The concept that a subject must be studied in its entirety by every student who offers it is both outmoded and counterproductive. For instance, a student's particular interest may lie in the direction of Organic Chemistry (there was a time, when one could not enter Medical Faculty without passing the Organic Chemistry paper at AL) and perhaps, particularly, in Natural Products Chemistry. Such a student need not be forced to study Physical Chemistry. Herein lies the rationale for the re-structuring of subjects into more or less 'stand alone' modules. These are not to be confused with what are

called 'units' that are simply parts of the subject that are examined separately.

The modular system that has been recommended under the University Reforms allows for cross-discipline and cross-faculty combinations of modules. The advantages are immense. With students having the opportunity of choosing from a variety of options in working towards their degrees, the present practice of cloning unemployable graduates would disappear. Science students could choose interesting and useful modules from other Faculties and vice-versa. Another advantage that would accrue is that students need not make final choices for all their three or four years of study, in their first year. Decisions can be influenced by perceived and emerging needs in the employment market.

The reforms envisage direct involvement of public and private sector experts in academic bodies and in teaching and research. It is expected that, where appropriate, there would be on-the job training for which credit is given. In-plant training and vacation placements. In this manner the output from the Universities would be attuned, at the outset, to the mind-set and attitudes characterising the world of work.

The current emphasis on end of year and end of degree course examinations will be removed. Course assessments, credit for Project work and in-plant training will be given more prominence. Where appropriate 'sandwich courses' that include an year or lesser period in industry or other work place would form part of the standard degree structure. Flexibility in the examination system would allow students who wish to take time off to work, perhaps to support themselves, to do so.





The Introduction of new subject areas.

The university system has not been noted in the past for any degree of keenness for change in innovative directions. The number of new courses that depart from the conventional mode is, indeed, very limited. As in other parts of the world, there has been a tendency to view subjects that are not purely academic and intellectual in content as not belonging to university curricula. However, attitudes and approaches have changed drastically and rapidly in most parts of the world, both East and West, while our thinking has remained stagnant. Some of our newer universities are launching out on new courses related directly to economic development and catering to emerging areas of employment. One major area of economic activity that is likely to boom in the next few years is the tourist industry. There is no reason why university courses should not take into account the higher level needs of such developments. Eco-tourism is an area which has great economic potential and requires personnel trained in special aspects of biodiversity, ecology, anthropology and archaeology. Similarly, while there is great emphasis now being placed on Information Technology, there is tremendous scope for the development of new courses in fields such as Telecommunication Technology and Satellite Imagery.

It is necessary that the university system should not be averse to commencing subjects 'de novo'. We have for too long, followed a practice of building at the university upon subjects taught at the Advanced Level. For instance, to qualify to study a subject at the University a student should have offered that subject at the Advanced Level. In a very few areas the approach has been refreshingly

different. Architecture and Law, for instance need not be learnt at basic level in High School and are open to students without much targeted preparation. University reforms require the launching out of the system into as many and diverse new subject areas as possible.

University Prerequisites and Flexibility at Advanced Level

The Advanced Level examination forms the link between the General Education system and the University Education system. The National Policy on General Education, now well into the implementation phase envisages increased options and flexibility of subject combinations at Advanced Level, thereby increasing the diversity and greater employment potential of the Advanced Level product. This farsighted policy which caters to the needs of the over 95 % of the AL student population, who do not enter University is nullified by the blinkered attitude of some University Faculties that specify three subjects of the three that can be offered as pre-requisites. Such insensitivity wreaks havoc on the future of a large majority of AL students. It is well known that most students and their parents aspire for places in the universities, especially in the fields of Medicine and Engineering. It is equally well known that the university system cannot absorb more than around 3 - 4 % of the total A/L population. Those not finding places in universities have to seek their fortunes elsewhere. A/L students, therefore, have no choice but to offer the stipulated subject combinations. These combinations are of limited value in the event of failure to gain university admission. Similar situation prevail in respect of other faculties too, but are less stringent. The university system, as it considers the reform process needs to look not only inwards at its own intake but needs, also, to take serious note of the adverse impacts that the excessively rigid

system of pre-requisites has on the A/L population at large by restricting the flexibility of subject combination available to student at that level. At most the system should limit the number of compulsory pre-requisites to one subject, allowing a freer choice for the other two A/L subjects. After all, even those who do not enter a university have to seek a future for themselves. They should not be strangled.

Student Welfare

While the Career Guidance Unit will look after issues related to courses, placements and job opportunities, there are other major aspects of a student's life in the university system that need attention. The system that should be evolved would take the student up from the point at which he or she is offered admission to university through to the point at which the student finally leaves the system. The stages would be:

- a. Pre admission
- b. Admission and freshman stage
- c. The student in the university environment
- d. The student in preparation for the world of life and work.

Universities will develop and expand their welfare services to cover this full sequence. It is essential to make the student feel that he is wanted, cared for and belongs to the system. Perceived shortcomings and problems should be identified and addressed at the earliest possible stage by constant staff - student dialogue and by stretching a helping hand when and where it is most needed.





The Establishment of Career Guidance Units

This is seen as an essential element if the changes in course structure outlined above are to operate successfully. The student community has often expressed the view that the academic staff and the university system do not really look after the interests of students. There is considerable truth in these views. Career Guidance Units are to be set up in every University. Their mandate will be to work closely with individual students, assess their aspirations and needs, guide them into the most suitable combinations of course options, help them to find vacation placements and on-the-job training opportunities and put them in contact with prospective employers. In practice, this means that the CGU will be in continuous contact with the time he enters the university until he leaves and even after and that the student would be working towards some attainable goal that he has set for himself.

The CGU will have a data bank on computer linked to a Central Data Bank at the UGC. The data bank will have inputs on the employment market, continuously updated. It will have all relevant student profiles. The CGU will also have the important function of keeping the Faculties informed of particular opportunities opening up in the job market, so that Modules can be adapted or designed to align graduates to such particular needs. In this manner the flexibility of the modular system can serve short and medium term needs as they arise.

In order to serve the above functions, the Career Guidance Unit at each university has to be a highly professional unit, with trained staff and appropriate infra-structure. It is envisaged that the Unit will be

headed by a Director (an academic of high standing, trained appropriately), one or more trained Career Guidance Officers and supported by Faculty members working on a part-time basis. Appropriate Computer Applications Assistants and Administrative Assistants will also be in position. The infrastructure will include offices for the Director and Career Guidance officers, databank and computers, seminar room and areas for interactive participation by the student community. The Career Guidance Unit will be a central hub of the reformed university system.

Training of Staff.

One of the main objectives of University Reform is to improve the quality of education given to the undergraduates. This will be achieved partly by improving the quality of curricula. Another major imperative is the quality of teaching staff. There has been no tradition of the university teacher being given pedagogical training. It is assumed that any graduate passing out with a First or Second class degree will automatically make an excellent teacher. This is far from being axiomatic. The opposite is often true. Therefore, it has been decided that each university will establish Staff Training Unit. Some universities have already done so and other universities are in the process of building up such units. For the moment, universities that do not have facilities, especially the newer universities have been requested to seek assistance from established Staff Training Units.

In future, all new recruits to the academic staff will have to undergo a stipulated course and period of training while they are on probation and complete it successfully. This would be a requirement for confirmation in the appointment. Such conditions would apply to new recruits into the technical and the administrative staff of the universities, as well.

Universities will develop systems whereby the performance of senior staff in position will be evaluated, at regular intervals. This will be done by departmental boards, faculty boards and inter university committees. It is envisaged that there will be representation on some of these boards of experts from outside the university system. The evaluation will cover both teaching activities, the development of curricula and contributions to research.

Collaboration with Public and Private Sector Institutions.

Universities have in general tended to be isolated islands of academic activity. In a climate where the country needs to use its intellectual and infrastructure resources to the maximum possible extent, such isolation is no longer desirable. In their teaching and research activities, as well as in the process of policy and decision making, it is expected that there will be as much interaction as possible between the university and research, industrial and commercial institutions. Specialist lecturers could be drawn from such institutions and students could develop part of their courses working with researchers in those locations. Further, there could be representation on Faculty Boards, Senates and Councils from such institutions. In fact, this does occur to a limited extent at the present time, but it is a practice that needs to be encouraged and expanded, drawing upon active rather than retired personnel. Even in the process of development of curricula such involvement is desirable to ensure that a link is maintained between the essential academic content of courses and their immediate usefulness in the context of the graduate passing out of the university.

Formal arrangements whereby Universities would help the private and





public sector with commissioned research would be mutually beneficial. Academic personnel should be invited to serve on Boards and as Consultants, especially where local expertise is equal to or superior to the foreign variety.

Skills Enhancement

In general, the overall quality of the output from the universities has been poor, in recent years. They have tended to swell the ranks of the unemployed while those who can absorb them are wary of doing so. In part, this is due to the lack of relevance of what they have learnt at university to the needs of the employer. However, in large measure this is attributable to the poor personal development, the lack of communication skills especially in English and the inability to demonstrate leadership qualities and the ability for independent thought, planning and action. The fault does not lie with the student but with the system that has

produced him. As an interim measure certain universities have programmes for skills enhancement of recent batches of graduates.

However, new programmes of study will need to include English, Computer Literacy and Communication skills as integral parts of the courses delivered either as separate elements or as parts of various courses themselves. The inclusion of Project work, In-plant training and work of similar nature will go a long way to personality development and the development of proper attitudes to the world of work.

Review of University Legislation

The University system currently operates under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, as amended from time to time. Over twenty years have gone by and many changes have taken place in the Universities, the country and the world of education. Action is being taken to review the legislation in its entirety. Changes are required to give effect to the Reforms in University Education.

Moreover, changes are required in the light of experience gained in the period since the promulgation of the original legislation.

Implementation of Reforms

The implementation of reforms is largely a matter for the Universities themselves. The Committee that has been appointed to oversee reforms will facilitate matters. Some of the reforms envisaged require heavier commitments on the part of the staff and much innovative thinking and action. It would be a move in the right direction for Universities to endeavour to become centres of excellence in various directions. To some extent this happens already. An element of competitiveness amongst universities would not be unwelcome. Students should be able to choose to go to particular institutions because courses offered are attractive and staff distinguished. A change in the current centralised admission system is needed both from the point of view of the student and the system. ■