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## HIGHER EDUCATION - PERSPECTIVES & CHALLENGES : UNIVERSITY AND PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION\*

D. WIJEYSEKERA

In considering higher education, its perspectives and challenges it would be vital to consider the education of the professionals. There are many noble professions that contribute towards national development, some very old, others comparatively young enfolding the many professionals.

The Education and Training of these professionals have passed through various phases and the role of universities in imparting such education has now assumed a greater importance.

Historically, before the formal establishment of academic courses of study at universities most professionals were educated through professional courses while being in employment or as trainees or as apprentices.

This was so mainly in the engineering profession before the recognition of the Ceylon Technical College, Colombo for the preparation of students for a degree in Engineering and thereafter in the development of similar academic courses in the University of Ceylon. Most engineers who have now reached the age of retirement did obtain their professional education through such professional courses. This would hold true even for legal and medical education respectively, before the commencement of the LL.B. degree and M.B.B.S. degree courses of studies, for many years the Law College as they do even now turned out the lawyers required for the legal profession and so did the Medical College. This was so also in Architecture and in many other professions where the academic courses of study have now been established and further developed even up to postgraduate level. Even for the profession of accountancy a university degree programme has now been launched and the degree is recognised by the professional body.

However, there are still professions such as nursing and other paramedical services in Sri Lanka where courses of study leading to University degrees have not yet been established. While welcoming the establishment and development of university degree level education, in professional areas, the important aspect of professionalism has to be safeguarded and maintained in order to produce the right mix of professionals which the country needs.

The university staff engaged in such professional education should have that much needed exposure and opportunities not only for research but also for professional practice so that they could do justice to their students when imparting knowledge. While

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advanced research contributes to the enhancement of knowledge as a whole, and to the training of individuals to be analytical, professional experience widens one's ability to face the more practical realities of the profession. In this connection, encouragement and opportunities given to medical faculty staff to obtain professional experience is laudable. But the lack of such exposure for the faculty staff of other professions is a shortcoming which could adversely reflect on their professional teaching. For example a first class honours engineering graduate could one day end up after many years of teaching and research as a Professor of Engineering without a single day's professional experience in Industry. Preventing such situations by creating opportunities for teachers to obtain the necessary professional experience which would naturally enrich their knowledge is a challenge for the future.

In designing professional courses at universities, care has been taken to include even in undergraduate syllabi some real life professional experience such as clinicals in medical education, in-plant training in engineering education and legal clinics in legal education. Whether such opportunities should be further developed and whether the opportunities available are being properly used by the students are all matters worth investigating.

Such healthy partnership augurs well for the future of professional education in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, those who qualify through such professional courses conducted through professional bodies most often demonstrate their professionalism very well due to the longer period of professional experience they have been exposed to, compared to their counterparts in the universities. Some of these professionals who have graduated through such courses subsequently seek postgraduate opportunities in universities and this enables them to compensate themselves for any shortcomings in their knowledge of the theoretical aspects of the discipline.

An important aspect of professional education which has surfaced in the recent past, though such shortcomings have existed for several years, is the shortage of middle level professionals required for development efforts in the country.

It is possible that this situation has arisen due to the prime concern of school leavers to enter the universities in order to obtain a university degree. The acute scarcity of places in universities for such aspirations have led to much frustration among intelligent and capable youth even when places are available, at least in some form or the other for middle level and lower level training.

Lack of opportunity for those who successfully complete middle level courses to further their education and proceed towards a degree or equivalent has been a grave disincentive for intelligent and capable youth who completed such courses.

Although it is not directly the role of university academics to be engaged in imparting middle level professional education, there is a major obligation on the part of the university academics to cooperate in the formulation and establishment of middle

level training facilities either through their individual capacity or through the universities. In planning and establishing such courses of study wherever they may be, located in Regional Colleges, University Colleges or Technical Colleges or wherever they may be one important aspect would be the need to leave the gates open for those who successfully complete such courses to further their education if they so deserve and desire upto degree level or even thereafter.

Although we are aware that there are many schools of thought on this issue and that there are many deliberations going on at different levels on this aspect, what is most important in the national interest is the establishment of middle level professional and job-oriented programmes of study.

The entry qualifications to these should be equal to the minimum gradings required for the university entrance and the final qualifications from such courses should be based on a grading system to make those who are so eligible to enter the university system with possible exemptions from the first year of the appropriate academic courses. These courses should be so planned jointly by academics and professionals in order to ensure that sufficient academic knowledge is obtained by the students who successfully complete them so that they would be eligible for exemption from the first year of the academic degree programmes and secondly to be ensured by the professionals that these students who successfully complete such courses would fit into the job market. This is an excellent example of the joint role that academics and professionals could play in formulating such programmes of study which are required not only for development efforts in the land but also for the benefit of thousands of frustrated youth who are unable to enter the conventional university system.

As mentioned earlier, the development of such courses could be on a separate network of Regional Colleges under a single coordinating body or through university colleges attached to the present universities as provided by the Universities Act.

The community Colleges in the U.S. and Canada recruit students with the minimum qualification for university entrance are a case in point. On graduation these students are able to enter the job market or the 2nd year of the university degree courses. That is the future of the thousands of students who are unable to achieve even the minimum mark necessary for university entrance is yet another problem. For such, there could be lower level, and/or craft level courses, the completion of which will enable them to consider that qualification equivalent to the minimum mark required for admission to mid-level courses if they so deserve by their merit performance and also if they so desire. In the planning of tertiary education in Sri Lanka, there is a major role for academics and professionals to perform jointly at the lower or craft level courses, and runs through middle level courses and also the universities both at undergraduate and post-graduate levels. The two key factors to be borne in mind are that completion of each of these courses should enable the students to fit into the job market. This is something the professional would have to ensure, and the other is to ensure that there

is no lowering or dilution of academic standards. This aspect is very much the responsibility of the academics.

In conclusion it should be emphasised that all these courses are equally important. Whether they be courses at postgraduate or undergraduate levels or in professional areas or in middle level professional courses perhaps outside the university system, they should be formulated, designed and developed by the joint participation of academics and professionals wherever possible and necessary for professionals from industry to be requested to assist in the conducting of such courses in specialised professional aspects. At the same time university academic staff in professional areas should be encouraged and opportunities made available to obtain the much needed professional experience, and finally the interaction between the university academics and professional bodies should be strengthened as it could lead to mutually beneficial outcomes both in the university academic courses in professional areas and even in courses of study conducted by professional bodies.

It is imperative that through the Senates of respective Universities and the Councils of professional bodies greater emphasis and attention be paid towards interaction and collaboration between academics and professionals, so that the budding professionals of this land would be a valuable asset not only to the country but also to the world at large.