

# Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education within a Knowledge Society: The Sri Lankan Context

## Quality in Tradition

**K**nowledge society' and 'knowledge economy' are two terms that have been formulated during recent times in the context of growth and development. Nevertheless, it has to be pointed out that these concepts were in vogue from the days of old, at least in our part of the world, particularly in India. Of course different terminology was used. It is of interest to delve into the literature of the East to discover the most comprehensive definitions of education. The fact that educationists of the orient in the past had clear views about the nature and function of education and knowledge is evident from the following:

*Vidyā dadāti vinayaD - vinayādyāti pātratām.*

(Knowledge gives discipline, discipline gives adaptability).

*Vijñā uppatatam se++hā.*

(Among all that arise in the world, knowledge is supreme).

Such adages could be multiplied. The words 'Vidyā/Vijñā' in the above statements imply not just 'science' but give a broad meaning covering all aspects of knowledge.

We wish to refer to yet another definition of learning from a Sanskrit work, *Pratyasataka* exemplifying the ten characteristics of knowledge.

*Akrodham ārogyam jitenāriyatvam  
Dayā karuṇā sarvajāna priyatvam  
Nirlobhā dātā bhayasoka muktir  
Gnānaprabhedā dasalakshanāni.*

(Good temper, good health, control of senses, kindness, compassion, popularity, liberality, generosity, freedom from fear and repentance - These are the ten characteristics of learning.)

The *Disāpāmok cāriya*, in the days of old was the embodiment of all these qualities. It was his responsibility to impart these qualities to his pupils from generation to generation. Education involved complete development of mental, physical, moral and emotional values and qualities.

The world changes rapidly. Today with the advancement, acquisition and creation of knowledge, side by side with development at an accelerated pace, in addition to advances in science and technology and information technology, the world seems to have reached a point of saturation as regards knowledge generation. It is a matter of just pressing a button of the computer on the desk to ask for the required information and instantly, more than everything on the subject under the sun would be supplied not excluding underworld information. We are at a loss to consider, for a moment if all the details provided are meaningful and conducive to human progress. This is the nature of the contemporary knowledge society.

## Education for All

To come closer to Sri Lanka, we have enjoyed Free Education since its introduction in 1944, but the fact remains that one cannot fulfil the aspirations of one's education, particularly, higher education with free education alone.

The policy of the Government has been:

(a) to provide opportunities for higher education for all those seeking such education, and

(b) to offer maximum benefits to a wider spectrum of society, while maintaining high standards in education.

Today, we have 15 State universities including the Open

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university and 11 Post-graduate Institutes within the university system. There are external and Distance Education degree programmes as well. In addition, there are other State and non-state institutions conducting degree courses. Of late, more institutions offering higher education have come up and many more such education providers are in the offing. With the Government taking a liberal attitude towards the modes of providing higher education, it is inevitable that the private sector would come forward to play a leading role. There could be institutions affiliated to foreign universities as well, while some others would provide higher education locally independent of reputed foreign universities. There would be private bodies offering professional degrees catering to their respective requirements. Thus, the policy of expansion of higher education would fulfil its expectations with unforeseen dimensions.

## Constrains

The opening up of higher education for all those who seek higher education without barriers is one thing. On the other hand despite its attractive features, this liberal policy tends to create other deeper problems. In Sri Lanka, today with all restrictions with regard to admission and so forth, higher education is not devoid of quality issues. In fact quality in higher education has been a major issue.

The present admission procedure based on merit and district quota

to the State universities itself seems questionable. There exist wide disparities as to the quality of students admitted to the 'prestigious' universities on the one hand and the new universities on the other. The district quota system has given rise to other problems as the quality of attainment of students selected from the respective districts even to the same faculty. At present, the non-State universities are left with those students not selected to State universities, so much so that at the beginning itself the quality of education has created disparities.

All parents expect their children be given a good education and finally end up with a respectable university degree. Even today with all advances in education, most parents seem to be satisfied if the child gets admission to a university irrespective of the degree programme they are selected to follow. Certain parents of rural areas seem to feel that gaining admission of their son or daughter to a university would satisfy all their future aspirations. Employment prospects and other considerations are secondary matters. A degree has become a prestige symbol that would elevate the child by a couple of steps in the social ladder. This situation has undoubtedly led to numerous problems within the universities and outside. A proper career guidance and counselling system at the secondary school level, particularly at the GCE (OL) and Advanced Level would have served a meaningful purpose in rectifying this situation.

### **Expansion of Higher Education**

Further, universities have common problems as well as situations peculiar to each of them, particularly so with the young universities. Providing hostel facilities, recruitment and training of academic and non academic staff, retaining them for a considerable length of time, research facilities, finance and administration etc. are some of the factors that lead

to disparities. And all these factors together would lead to indiscipline within the universities. Social and political factors too have a bearing on the smooth functioning of educational institutions. With the private sector coming into the scene, the situation would tend to be more complicated.

Further, during the recent past, there have been vast changes in the Technical and Vocational Education sector. Our society is beginning to realize and be not satisfied with the traditional university degrees. To cater to this demand, Technical and Vocational Universities and Training Institutions are being set up. This is one area where the career guidance and counselling could serve a useful function. Such counselling could divert the large numbers of students away from Arts and Humanities streams towards the technical and vocational disciplines as far as job opportunities are concerned.

There are other considerations that deserve our attention. Universities are not meant to be job factories; at the same time all or most of those passing out of the universities and higher education institutions need employment. Not to talk of principles of education, it has to be accepted that one spends the best few years of one's life at Higher Education Institutes (HEI's) with the hope of gaining employment to enjoy a comfortable life apart from gaining a broader outlook on society after obtaining a degree. Out of a number of professionally oriented disciplines that are well-known, in the present Sri Lankan context, for example Medicine and Engineering, all other disciplines have their problems. Those engaged in these disciplines themselves feel that their expectations have not been fulfilled. On the other hand there is dissatisfaction on the part of the would be employers both in the public and the private sectors. With the deterioration of standards and quality, in the context of a highly competitive world, those engaged in higher education and the higher education providers have to be more and more cautious.

### **English and ICT**

In the modern world, proficiency in languages and Information and Communication Technology has become the basis of the knowledge economy. Out of the world languages, in the Sri Lankan context, English has gained priority over all other languages. And it is common understanding that the majority of our students are below the expected standards. Further, with Globalization coming into the forefront in all activities of mankind, all higher education institutions, both public and private are faced with further challenges in terms of the type and quality of education provided. Side by side with the quality of education, the public image of the institution created within and outside the country play a leading role as well.

Availability of human resources and budgetary facilities, research activities, employability of those passing out of the institution and so on have gained priority over everything else. Proliferation of higher education providers seems to be the general world trend, and Sri Lanka is no exception. Already there exist a good number of non-State HEIs with a fair student population with all such provisions competing with our State universities.

Since free education has taken a stronghold in our country it will certainly stay within the State universities in the same form at least for a couple of decades to come. Nonetheless, more and more parents and students seem to look for avenues outside the non-fee levying State universities. The reality is that a good percentage of the parents have spent a considerable amount of money when their children reach the higher education entry level. Moreover the State universities are not in a position to ensure the completion of the relevant study programme within the stipulated period. There are times when a Degree programme of 3 or 4 years would not be completed even within 5 years. All these factors compel the parents and students to look for other avenues, disregard of the expenditure incurred.

## Academic Staff

We have already made passing mention to the need of a well qualified academic staff so as to maintain quality in education. Further, retaining the qualified personnel for long in our universities seems to be a more acute problem. In the higher education quarters, the exposure of the younger teachers in other HEIs, mainly in reputed foreign universities is most desirable. This training would help them not only to broaden their knowledge and keep abreast with the latest teaching-learning methodologies but also to get acclimatised to the research culture within an academic community. The Arts and Humanities departments of our universities are badly handicapped with the lack of these opportunities.

There is another consideration that has not received sufficient attention by the providers of higher education. The HEIs may equip the stakeholders with all knowledge and experience in the broadest possible magnitude. And then the student passing out of the HEI will be called upon to face the challenges of coming to terms with the world of work. In other words the young person who has obtained a degree will have to overnight transform himself/herself as a meaningful person in the world of work.

Before we come to our main proposition, it is necessary to point out another new trend taking place in some of our universities. If one were to scrutinize the results sheets of the universities, one would but be pleased or rather be amazed to note the high percentage of first and second classes, mostly upper division, achieved by the students. This situation can be attributed, in a way, to the competition that exists among HEIs. Now an inquisitive observer would be glad about the achievement of the individual student and the institution, but one will be compelled to think twice before coming into conclusions. On the other hand, the real quality of

the class will have to be tested in the performance at an interview and even with the record in the workplace. Further the present writer is aware that in certain universities under the preview of the University Grants Commission (UGC), there is a tendency to introduce courses and course units irrespective of the relevance and usefulness to the subject or the students at the whims and fancies of certain lecturers and department heads. These may certainly be exceptions. Nevertheless, if this situation exists even rarely in spite of the UGC supervision how could the universities maintain quality?

It is envisaged that opening up of more HEIs, State and non-State, would tend to complicate matters further.

On the other hand, we can certainly be proud of the achievements of our universities about the high quality graduates produced over the last sixty odd years. Products of our universities have shown distinction and have successfully competed with those from prestigious world universities. Our task should be to maintain those standards and enhance quality.

### **The Quality Movement of Education**

In a developing world, education opportunities at all levels should expand without barriers of any sort, subject to certain considerations towards progress. At the same time we have to give due consideration to the developments in the field of higher education in the global context. From as far back as the 1980's different stakeholders in higher education including education providers, public and private, seem to have drawn their attention to a concept identified as 'The Quality Movement in Education'. Maintaining some kind of quality applies to all areas of education and more so in respect of higher education. In the context of the contemporary global village society where all knowledge is connected to everything else it is inevitable that there will be high competition in education. We see

quality in higher education being discussed as a broad concept with no specific borders nor unanimous definitions. It may vary from country to country, nation to nation, age to age, institution to institution and even among different ethnic groups. Different stakeholders may consider quality from different standpoints. Some may view quality of an educational institute from the external appearance, palatial buildings, pleasant environment etc. Some may be attracted by the prestigious academic courses available, teaching-learning provisions, number of prestigious passes, (first/second class), employment opportunities, reputation in research output and such other considerations.

In most developed countries, such considerations are available to parents and children before selecting a higher education institution. On the other hand, in Sri Lanka today eligibility for higher education, the university courses to be offered are all decided by outside agencies, namely the UGC, and not the students nor the parents. In other words, the future of a young person opting for higher education will be decided upon through a mechanical process beyond the control of the stakeholders. These factors too affect the quality of education and the quality of the recipient. However, in the global context, a country, a government, an educational organization cannot be promiscuous to the world trend. The universities and other higher education institutions the world over and other educational and cultural organizations as the UNESCO have all, without exception, over the past few decades have drawn their attention to maintaining, safeguarding, improving and sponsoring this sacred notion of Quality.

The Sri Lankan universities have not lagged behind. Recognizing the need for a mechanism of maintaining quality in education, our universities, it must be said to their credit, that initiatives have been taken in this regard. As far back as 2001 the committee of Vice-chancellors and Directors (CVCD)

had developed a Quality Assurance framework and in July 2002, a *Quality Assurance Handbook* was published by the CVCD with the collaboration of the UGC. Another document titled *Academic Procedure Handbook* was published the following year. Since then, further studies were made and reports published in allied areas. Of late, a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council has been set up by the UGC to oversee the functioning of quality in different universities. There are two other projects functioning under the Ministry of Higher Education related to quality improvement. They are 'The Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education, popularly known as IRQUE and the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP). These projects functioning with World Bank assistance are provided mainly with funds to develop Infra-structure facilities. In 2009, a book titled *Quality Assurance Toolkit: Distance Higher Education Institutions and Programmes* was published with the assistance of the Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO to facilitate Distance Education Projects.

### Technical and Vocational Sector

In the technical and vocational education sector, the Technical and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) under the present Ministry of Youth Affairs has the responsibility for Quality Assurance matters. A significant feature of the Technical and Vocational Education and Training is its inherent heterogeneity. Unlike in Higher Education, training in this area has been hereditary or often expert skill is acquired through hard work alone, toiling under a senior. To rectify this situation the NVQ (National Vocation Qualification), a certification system was introduced about the year 2004 by the TVEC. It has to be pointed out that this is a novel innovation requiring time and patience to establish itself and also win the confidence of the stakeholders. Nevertheless, this system would fulfil the objective by accrediting the courses conducted

by the numerous training centres requiring to be registered with TVET. It has to be said that even this has not received publicity and proper acceptance.

Thus, it is evident that all HEIs in Sri Lanka and the universities have been concerned and some progress has been made in respect of Quality Assurance. Nevertheless, much more concerted effort seems desirable should Sri Lanka were to reach the global levels in this regard.

### Reaching Global Levels

We now wish to refer to the observations made by the World Bank in its publication, *The Towers of Learning: Performance, Peril and Promise of Higher Education in Sri Lanka*, July 2009. In fact, the present writer takes liberty to assume that the entire publication has concentrated itself on the theme, Quality Assurance, although it contains only one chapter titled 'Enhancing Higher Education Quality' (Ch 3). Hence I am obliged to quote extensively from this work.

"Within the public universities, quality assurance mechanisms are only just commencing for post graduate education programs, and will require substantial future development. All the undergraduate level quality assurance processes have been introduced during the recent past, but these now need to be developed and strengthened to become an integral part of the university system" (p. E6).

"...the country needs well-functioning quality assurance systems for the overall higher education sector, including university undergraduate degrees and postgraduate degrees, distance education programs, alternative higher education courses, and private sector degree programs. Competent and credible quality assurance systems will benefit policymakers, higher education providers, students and parents...." (p.9).

As said earlier, in recent years, there has been a new trend in the field of higher education in Sri Lanka. That is the opening up of new degree awarding HEIs by non-governmental organizations, also institutions affiliated to foreign

universities with the approval of the UGC or even without. For example, the SLIIT (Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology), Aquinas College of Higher Education Studies. There has been no mechanism whatsoever to enhance quality in these non-State institutions, except certain initiatives being taken on their own. Hence any proposal for Quality Assurance in HEI's in Sri Lanka should encompass not only the 15 State universities, the post graduate institutes and other universities outside the purview of the UGC but all other degree awarding institutes, State as well as non-State.

It is in this background that the National Education Commission (NEC), the organization responsible for the formulation of education policy in Sri Lanka has decided to consider the possibility of formulating a policy on Quality aspects in the Higher Education institutions in Sri Lanka.

### A National Quality Assurance Council

The document titled *National Policy Framework on Higher Education and Technical and Vocational Education, 2009*, prepared by the National Education Commission and submitted to HE the President Mahinda Rajapaksa comprised of a full set of recommendations pertaining to the entire Higher Education sector. These recommendations were favourably accepted by the President. One full chapter of the document was devoted to Quality Assurance, Assessment and Accreditation.

Before going into details let us take the main policy recommendation on the above subject. These recommendations, if implemented in the proper spirit would have a good impact on the entire Higher Education system in Sri Lanka. It reads as follows:

*'Establish a National Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (NQAAC) to cover all areas of Higher Education and Technical and Vocational Education in Sri Lanka.'*

In keeping abreast with developments in higher education the world over and recognizing the policy of expansion of higher education, Sri Lanka has already

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accepted the private sector involvement. As pointed out earlier there are already such institutions functioning. At the same time, it becomes the function of the State and its responsibility to ensure that best quality is maintained by higher education providers in all institutions.

It need not be said that quality assurance is not a concept maintained by separate institutions within their own standards. HEIs may achieve quality separately by themselves. While respecting those identities in each of the centres of excellence, it is desirable that there exist uniformity in quality. It is possible to dwell on this topic at length but there is unanimity as regards maintaining uniformity in quality within a few prestigious Institutions and among the State universities within the country. It is expected that this requirement should cover all HEIs, State, affiliated, private and all other categories. It is in this spirit that the National Education Commission has proposed the establishment of the above mentioned NQAAC.

The NEC has not disregarded the long cherished concept of 'Autonomy' in the HEIs.

Maintaining Quality in HEIs is even more important. It would be possible to work out an equation between Autonomy and Quality.

### **Functions of the NQAAC**

The main functions of the proposed NQAAC would include the following:

(a) Enhance the quality of education in all HEIs, public and private, through regular reviews of all academic activities in the institutions.

(b) Ensure academic standards by setting national goals and guidelines by establishing a common Credit and Qualifications framework for all HEIs, a quality assessment system as well as external assessments.

(c) Keep abreast with developments in the world of knowledge and the world of work without prejudice to social relevance.

For the successful implementation of the above recommendations the following proposals are mandatory:

(i) Establishment of a Common Credit and Qualifications framework for all HEIs.

(ii) Establishment of a Quality Assessment system for all HEIs which includes internal as well as external assessment.

It is evident that certain universities and faculties are not quite familiar with the credit based modular structure operative in

other parts of the world. Hence it is desirable that our faculty members be given some in depth understanding of the system. A common Credit and Qualifications framework at the national level would contribute to the maintenance of uniformity of standards among the respective courses offered by the different HEIs. It would enable students to accumulate meaningful credits from other HEIs so as to complete a degree. Such a system would also facilitate uniformity of the levels of achievement and standards of the qualification. Further, from the point of view of the employer too, it would help better assessment of the employee.

The proposed National Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council will be an umbrella organization with authority to oversee the maintenance of quality in all areas of Higher Education, a statutory body under HE the President set up by an Act of Parliament. Of course, some of the functions of the present UGC will have to be transferred to the Council. It has been unanimously agreed throughout the world that quality assurance agencies should be fully autonomous bodies which operate independently without any possible influence or interference from outside. ■