

Issues of Quality of University Education and Staff Development

W.D. Lakshman

A university in its proper sense was established in Sri Lanka in 1942 with the establishment of the University of Ceylon by statute. The single university system of the first two decades or so after 1942 has by now expanded into 15 public sector universities operating under the guidance and supervision of the UGC. This segment of the system of university education in Sri Lanka has developed over the years on the foundation of a few fundamental premises: (i) state sector monopoly of university education; (ii) “free” education up to Bachelor’s Degree level; (iii) centrally controlled student admissions to universities; and (iv) uniformity among different universities through central control in institutional characteristics of the universities. In addition to the 15 UGC-supervised public sector universities, there are eight public and private sector institutions enjoying the degree awarding status awarded by the UGC and another set of institutions, set up under varying statutory provisions, engaged in the training of students for degrees of various foreign universities. The next few years are likely to produce far reaching changes in the structure of university education in the country, including the establishment of statutory conditions for setting up fully fledged privately funded universities. In my talk today, my comments are restricted to the 15 UGC-supervised public sector universities.

During the long period of its evolution, the system of university education in Sri Lanka has recorded substantial and impressive achievements. Their contribution to human capital development was extensive. The graduates from universities have occupied significant, often dominant, positions, not only in the professions like medicine, engineering and law, but also in the administrative services, police and security services, modern business establishments, university academia, secondary school teaching and so on. These universities have brought about significant social mobility within Sri Lankan society. The contribution of the universities to cultural revival in the country is widely acknowledged.

The research output varied from individual to individual in the academia, and also collectively, from one Department to another within a Faculty as well as from one Faculty to another and from one university to another. Yet the university system has developed into a rich resource pool of theoretical and empirical research. It is also observed that the links between university research, on the one hand, and industry, agriculture and other economic activities as well as government policy processes, on the other, have become closer.

In spite of this record of achievements, most commentators would point to various weaknesses of Sri Lanka’s university system. The following are some of the widely heard criticisms:

- Low quality of graduates passing out from universities in general, and those from non-professional Faculties in particular. Among many aspects of this problem, the non competence of these graduates in English or any other international language is particularly strongly highlighted.
- The complaint that many graduates from local universities are also weak in terms of not only knowledge and its applications, but also in important life skills, thus making them unacceptable to private sector employers.
- Slow and inadequate reform within universities.
- The absence of correspondence between the structure of training fields in universities and the

structure of demand for work places in terms of these training fields, so that there is under-production of graduates in some disciplines while there is over-production in others.

- Failure of local universities to compete effectively in the global market for university education facilities, in spite of the rapid progress in the country's liberalisation process.
- As an overarching causal factor behind these weaknesses the under-funding of the universities and inefficient use of limited resources within universities are highlighted.

Some would even go as far as to say that the system of university education in the country has gone into a serious crisis. Such adverse commentaries have become rather widespread and extensive over the last 2 to 3 decades. The global socio-economic and technological transformations since the 1970s – processes of liberalisation, close integration of individual societies with the process of globalisation and the ICT revolution spreading rapidly across the world and so on – produced numerous changes in pivotal institutional structures in almost every society and polity in the world. The university systems everywhere naturally have experienced the pressure of these global changes.

There is clearly a huge concern about the quality of university education in Sri Lanka today. The question of quality in university education can mean different things to different people. It may also refer to different things also at different times. In the Sri Lankan context in particular, the following factor has to be kept in mind when some of the widely made criticisms about poor quality of the education imparted by our universities are to be correctly understood. As part of our social policy commitments, university education opportunities were opened up to intelligent and the academically committed members of the lower middle class (quite often also of poor families) from both rural and urban backgrounds. But the attitudes of high society, including business leaders and decision-making groups, changed rather slowly making the graduates passing out from certain departments of study and faculties of universities not being accepted by the elite segments of society as capable and competent. This is however, an extremely complex issue that requires extensive discussion and on which I have some heretical thoughts. Unfortunately I do not have the time here to go into this interesting subject at all.

One common way of looking at the concept of quality – a view that is quite attractive to an economist like me – is to define it as indicating the extent to which resources are effectively utilized to achieve agreed goals. This quality concern was an outgrowth of the concept of accountability of managers of big business. In respect of all commercial, industrial and service organizations, the demand for accountability arises from the concerns of both stakeholders and beneficiaries.

During my university days and those of my contemporaries and a few batches following us, the academic communities in the universities themselves could establish their own criteria of what constituted "good quality university education". This is not possible any more. In the early stages of development of our university system we implicitly defined the required standards, like many other universities in former British colonies, in terms of equivalence to the British counterparts. In almost every department of study in every faculty within the University of Ceylon, for example, standards were determined according British university standards. This was a system of elitist university education, where the provider of education, himself/ herself belonging to the social elites served, could determine the quality standards of the education he/ she was imparting. Neither the students nor their prospective employers questioned the right of the university teacher to decide what is taught and how it is taught. And the university teachers themselves took decisions about these

matters with a great deal of social responsibility. Academics in this older tradition were very responsible and accountable, more than anything else, to their own conscience.

The issues of accountability are expressed differently in the present day context. The universities are compelled to account for the manner in which their scarce resources, financial, human and physical, are utilized. When the government is the main funder, these issues are raised in forums like the Parliament and its various committees. Other stakeholders – e.g. students and their organizations – will raise accountability questions within university premises and in various other forums. When the funding comes from private sources, still, accountability questions are raised from university managers by investors, parents of students, students themselves and other stakeholders. The universities, whatever the source of their funding, are compelled to take account of the views of stakeholders including, importantly, students, parents and prospective employers. The need for national accreditation mechanisms is often highlighted with quality assurance and accreditation bodies treated like referees.

Universities the world over are beginning to recognize and accept this new reality. If they are perceived as not providing value for money by delivering a quality product, they run the risk of either having quality control systems imposed on them, or of being marginalized in favour of other institutions which are prepared to abide by the rules of the game. The university is seen as a service provider, with students seen and treated as the university's clients. As such, the university is obliged to maintain acceptable standards of quality in its graduates. When it enrolls a student, it undertakes to provide that student with a set of learning experiences which would transform him /her into a better educated person with enhanced intellectual capacity, and increased skills and knowledge. Viewing the student as client, the universities nowadays seek student views regarding quality of teaching and instruction, in addition to consulting other stakeholders.

The responsibility for "poor quality" education in the universities in Sri Lanka, whichever segment of the university system deserves this allegation, lies partly (perhaps significantly) in factors beyond the control of universities, whether treated individually or collectively. Yet, from a number of points of view, the criticism has to be accepted that this was also the result of a series of failures on the part of universities. Quality of education imparted by a university would depend on the quality of students and their commitment, the nature of facilities available for teaching and learning, the quality of teachers in service and such other matters.

These concerns about quality of education imparted by universities led to widespread reform movement in the world university scene. This could be observed within Sri Lanka as well, particularly since the 1990s. There were extensive discussions at various forums within universities themselves and also within other related institutions, like the UGC, CVCD, National Education Commission, Ministries of Education and Higher Education and the Presidential Secretariat, about needed corrective action. This university reform movement has been influenced and guided by contemporary developments in the world university scene as well as domestic problems like widespread unemployment among graduates. The spheres of reform have included, among others, curriculum change, staff development, career guidance for students, introduction of student evaluation of teaching, review of university departments of study, institutional review of universities and so on. Some of the initiatives taken in the second half of the 1990s, on universities' own volition, have come to stay – e.g. the Staff Development Centre in Colombo and elsewhere, curriculum reforms in Colombo Medical Faculty, move toward course unit systems, career guidance initiatives in

collaboration with private sector and so on. Of these different reform areas, let me use the little time left to make a few comments about issues of university staff development.

In the highly quality conscious environment in which universities are compelled to perform, the teacher occupies a pivotal position as the principal agent imparting that quality education. The role of teachers in higher education is measured in terms of skills imparted to students. In the immediate to short term these skills ought to be adequate to find career positions for the holders of those skills. This is where university staff development or faculty development comes in. Such programmes, which replaced the traditional systems of learning by doing or of doing things as one's seniors did, are expected to impart several skill types to university faculty. It is clearly more than just teacher training.

- intellectual (instructional) development skills,
- personal development skills,
- professional development skills, and
- social development skills

These skills would help teachers play their instructional, professional and organizational roles more effectively within universities.

Differences and variations in the quality of teachers in present day Sri Lankan universities are rather extensive. The average quality of teachers, in relatively new universities, is considered to be considerably lower than in older universities. Even in any given university, there appears to be substantial variation in teacher quality among Faculties. So is among different departments of study within a given Faculty. The questionable suitability of many university teachers for the positions they hold can be attributed to many factors. I consider the failure of our universities to develop effective systems of training their recruits in instructional, professional, organizational and social development skills as a major contributory factor here.

Except in the Faculties of Medicine and in a few other special cases, new teachers are recruited from among those applicants holding excellent Bachelor's degrees, often with no work experience and generally with no postgraduate training. On the question of training these new recruits for the university teaching profession the following was a statement I made in a speech I delivered towards the end of the 1990s: "The new recruits are expected to acquire teaching skills on-the-job. But experience has shown that, more often than not, this has failed in reality. Some Faculties have developed teacher-training programmes for their members. Some others used the services of existing Faculties of Education to provide the teachers some training in teaching methods. These were at best ad hoc arrangements. No systemic and institutionalised mechanisms for the purpose have been developed. The only such institutionalised mechanism so far is the Staff Development Centre of the University of Colombo set up in 1997. It is only now that action is being taken to make some training in the methods of tertiary level teaching compulsory for the confirmation of teachers".

So prior to the commencement of the staff development "movement" in our universities, only an insignificant few among academics have had any professional training as university teachers, either before or after joining the profession. The situation today, I am sure, is very different as staff development has been made a condition for confirmation in the position of lecturer, and facilities for the necessary training in academic skills are available in our universities at least at a rudimentary

level. Thus the bulk of teachers today, if not all, can be expected to have had the exposure to professional staff development training.

In the same address I made in the late 1990s I have made the following remark: “Though it may appear to be a very harsh statement, the reality is that there is a substantial number of teachers, in any given university, who are rather unsuitable for the position of a university academic, in terms of their academic qualifications, competencies, commitments and attitudes.” When I made this statement I was speaking either as the chairman of the CVCD or slightly after I had that experience. I do not have the required extensive familiarity with the university system now to make a judgmental statement about teacher quality today. I would simply refer to a statement in the editorial of the *Island* of 10 May 2011:

University teachers have their weaknesses; they have their lapses. Some of them are even culpable for dereliction of duty. There are also total misfits among them as is common knowledge. But, the fact remains that the vast majority of university dons are hardworking and underpaid.

In my statements of the late 1990s too, though it was not specifically mentioned, I would have totally agreed with the last sentence in this *Island* editorial comment.

Would the judgment of a person with system-wide knowledge and experience be that the average quality of university teachers today is substantially better than was the case a decade or a couple of decades ago? If it is so then we could be happy that the university reform movement since the 1990s has produced the desired results. I am not as familiar as I was in the late 1990s about the conditions in the entire university system. The information gathered, though not systematically, from written material, public addresses made and seminars given by knowledgeable persons, Parliamentary discussions, and more importantly, through informal conversations with friends, tells me that not everything is well with our universities and that there are no strong reasons to believe that the quality of their teachers today is substantially better than it was before the contemporary wave of university reforms began a little more than a decade ago.

Progress in the sphere of staff development no doubt generated benefits, but the quality issue pertaining to Sri Lankan universities in general, and to university teachers, in particular, is associated with many factors, some internal and others, external to the university system. There is no time now for even a cursory discussion of all these factors. I am sure though, that the efforts of those who served the staff development venture of the university system have helped in improving conditions. Clearly the malaise affecting the system requires a multi-pronged approach with stronger measures going beyond mere staff development.

The system of universities in the country has developed without any systematic, regular and built-in mechanism for on-going assessment or evaluation of their activities. Internally, there were systems put in place, though subject to shortcomings, to evaluate a university teacher’s teaching and research performance. Student evaluation of teaching, not available in universities before the contemporary reform movement, now obtains, I understand, in almost every university. Systems adopted for the evaluation of research have undergone tightening, but appear to be still rather leniently implemented – at least in some universities and some faculties. There has been evaluation of Departments, Faculties as well as overall campuses and universities.

A number of institutional innovations have been made in order to implement the various measures introduced recently with the objective of improving the quality of university education, using the powers of the UGC, as laid down in the Universities Act (1978), to maintain academic standards in higher educational institutes. While the initiatives of the 1990s for university quality enhancement were entirely of domestic origin, there were signs of a World Bank agenda in the quality enhancement initiatives of the 2000s. The World Bank funded project for “Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education” (IRQUE) was intended to improve undergraduate education to ensure that university graduates effectively contribute to economic development and social harmony. It operated during 2003-09 and included various staff development activities as well.

The IRQUE project was succeeded by “Higher Education for the Twenty First Century” (HETC) project, also entirely funded by the World Bank. It also is intended to develop the institutional foundations and to improve quality and the economic and social relevance of services offered by Universities in Sri Lanka.

There is now a Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAA Council) with the vision to achieve excellence in higher education through quality assurance and the mission to ensure quality, continuous development and efficient performance of Sri Lankan higher education institutions, and to gain the confidence of the community in their graduates in accordance with internationally recognized evaluation mechanisms. There are also Internal Quality Assurance Units (IQAU) aimed at internal evaluation and at sustainable quality enhancement.

As a person whose entire professional career was associated with the country’s university system, I am indeed happy about all these initiatives for the improvement of quality of university education. In the rather wide prevalence of ideas like the ones I quoted from the above *Island* editorial, it is high time anyway to undertake an independent and rigorous evaluation about the extent of achievement of the lofty objectives set by all the initiatives for quality enhancement since the mid-1990s. I am sure the staff development “movement” has produced a distinct improvement in instructional, professional, organizational and social development skills of university teachers. Most of them probably have the right attitudes and the conscientiousness for the very responsible work they are doing. Yet there seems to be a strong sense of dissatisfaction in the society about our universities. Do the organized segments of the society and its political structures devote sufficient resources and energy to reform the environmental conditions that are external to universities? Building up a strong, effective, efficient and socially respected university system is critical in the achievement of the goals of “knowledge economy” and “knowledge hub”, which we are so familiar with today. This clearly requires internal as well as “external” or the so-called “environmental” reforms.