# SLAIHEE NEWSLETTER 2022

## Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness

**In this issue:**

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## *Editorial… by M. Prabhashrini Dhanushika*

On behalf of SLAIHEE, I welcome you with great pleasure to this e-Newsletter with SLAIHEE news 2021-2022. This SLAIHEE Newsletter (SN) is intended to further SLAIHEE goals to nurture the academics through various ways such as, supporting their professional development in teaching and learning (T&L), assisting quality improvement in university curricula (or policies), recognizing and rewarding outstanding contributions to higher education (HE) and disseminating scholarship on T&L. SN is a product of Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness (SLAIHEE) which is an independent not-for-profit organization of professionals, committed to enhancing effectiveness of T&L activities and supporting quality enhancement in HE in Sri Lanka.

According to the vision of SLAIHEE, we are trying to promote knowledge and skill development with regard to improved student and staff learning in HE. In that aspect, we are promoting and generating a range of activities involved in conceptual and methodological development on a short-term to long-term basis. For a number of years, SLAIHEE Executive Committee (ExCo) members have emailed to the membership a short weekly quote on HE from a recognized author, as "SLAIHEE THOUGHTS". Therefore, members can, in turn, form their own thoughts and analyze further if they wish to do so, spending a very short time or more per week on the SLAIHEE THOUGHT. In this way, SLAIHEE THOUGHTS form a series of quotes related to a topic in HE and the topic changes every month. This is done with the hope of generating some new thoughts in the members with regard to a range of topics that are currently relevant to Sri Lankan HE.

As a next step, SLAIHEE chose and discussed (on-line) a short article authored by an acknowledged expert, to interweave several 'thoughts' as well as expand a bit to show methods that can be applied to improve student classroom learning based on what he/she has written in his/her article. For example, 'Gibbs Ideas' discussion series done by Professor Suki Ekaratne, Dr. Iroja Caldera, and Dr. T. Sivakumar during the past year can be mentioned. This discussion series was based on the powerful ideas generated by Prof. Graham Gibbs who has written several short articles on improving T&L activities as a HE expert. So, this kind of discussion-webinar was designed as a one-hour session and the discussion was related to the series of thoughts, activities, concepts, and ideas included in the paper that particular expert has written.

Moving on to longer-duration events, we are organizing two- or three-hour workshops which facilitate and guide attendees through a process of active participation. Workshops are specifically designed to motivate them to learn new aspects through reflection on their own activities and, thus, to inspire them to action. Finally, SLAIHEE continues to organize an annual conference to disseminate scholarship on T&L on a wider platform.

To conclude, I will quote the statement made by SLAIHEE founding President in a previous SLAIHEE newsletter. "**It must be remembered that it is the university staff that needs to be empowered if we are to change the nature and outcomes of university education, through changing their perceptions and skills for delivering greater university accountability**".

*So, I would take this opportunity to invite you, specially, junior colleagues to join with us to be empowered in order to build a system that lifts us all to improve HE quality in our country.*

# An approach to enhance students' enthusiasm in learning...

Student-centered learning (SCL) is an active learning method that centers the student at the learning process and allows their interest and enthusiasm drive the education. Unlike in a teacher centered class room where the teacher becomes the primary source for knowledge, in a student centered class room, the students collaborate with their teacher and are actively engaged in learning by creating knowledge at their own pace (Griffin et al., 2012). Thus, the teacher's role becomes the role of a facilitator in the class room and the learners' responsibility is not neglected (Akalanka, 2019). When students get more opportunities to share what they found, it will facilitate to apprehend the concepts in a clear manner which would have been limited to teacher's knowledge and his/her life experiences if it was just a one-way learning process.

When the learning environment becomes more friendly and enjoyable, placing the teacher closer to a resourceful peer level, the students get more chances to realize their own level of learning (Benlahcene et al., 2020). Peer interaction and collaborative thinking leads to an abundance of knowledge which undoubtedly paves the way to enhance their knowledge. However, the teacher has to play a major role when designing the SCL activities. The SCL methods have to be clearly planned in the lesson plan in order to manage the time wisely. Thus, depending on the time allocated for the lesson and considering the content to be delivered, the teaching learning activities have to be designed appropriately. For example, active reading methods can be implemented by providing appropriate reading materials (Stoeger et al., 2014)

as printed handouts/ leaflets/ web links. Also, the learner can be directed to where the learning outcomes can be focused to by providing the intended learning outcomes and incomplete handouts (to let the learner explore the missing content). In SCL, the learner can engage in the learning process individually, in pairs or in groups to reach the same goal. Active writing, jigsaw method are some other methods that can be used to this end. The facilitator can ask several questions from lower cognitive level to a higher cognitive level during the activities to broaden and strengthen deep learning. Few brain storming questions before and after the lesson will also be useful for the teacher to identify the students' level of learning. Well planned SCL activities do not only provide education with joy and enthusiasm, but also improves soft skills that will in turn develop the personality and character of the learner.

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# Challenges of teaching and learning in higher education via online in light of the COVID-19 pandemic ...

The 'COVID-19 pandemic' no longer requires explanation and has made its impact on almost all sectors of human civilization in a drastic manner. People have been challenged with the uphill task of getting adapted to a new way of conducting their daily activities or a 'New normal'. In this backdrop, global education sector has also faced one of the greatest challenges ever encountered, by affecting the lives of more than 1.5 billion students and their families (UNESCO et al., 2020). It is found that approximately 220 million students in the global higher education (HE) sector have been affected due to the disruptions caused by COVID-19 (Farnell et al., 2021) and Sri Lanka is no exception. Most Sri Lankan Universities/HE institutes are yet to open or function at full capacity due to the prevailing situation. Students are compelled to stay away from University until a healthy and a safe physical environment is established. Most Universities have opted for 'Remote teaching, learning and assessment via online' as a solution to this issue and it has become a buzz word at present. The Government and HE policy making authorities in Sri Lanka have also promoted this approach on a regular basis. It has even become a popular topic on media and at various political forums. However, there is a major concern whether 'Remote teaching, and learning via online mode' has been able to serve its purpose as expected. If so, what are the issues concerned and challenges posed? The main purpose of this article is to highlight several key aspects in this regard.

It is worth to look at this issue from two perspectives: students and HE teachers. In the conventional HE system, students used to follow the academic programme through face-to-face sessions while learning via online accounts for only a minor portion of the whole exercise. In this context, changing the mindset of students to accept delivery via online as the one and only mode of learning became a huge challenge. In the conventional delivery mode, students were targeted not only to gain subject-specific competencies at the University, but also to develop essential soft skills such as collaboration, communication, leadership, teamwork etc. by interacting with their colleagues with provision of an academically conducive environment. However, in the remote/ online mode, students tend to lead a monotonous lifestyle spending all day in the virtual environment without experiencing any physical interaction with the peers. This generates undesirable stress levels in students which could lead to anger and frustration. It is revealed that this scenario has led to many psychological and emotional issues (Farnell et al., 2021). On the other hand, lack of technical skills and infrastructure in order to facilitate learning via online has become a key issue particularly among poor rural student communities in Sri Lanka. Apart from slow signal transmission and intermittent disruptions applicable to everyone, most low-income parents often find it difficult to afford a communication device together with a data package for their children. This is worsened by the present situation where making a living has also become a huge challenge due to the restrictions caused by the pandemic.

Getting hold of a communication device will not solve the problem entirely due to other technical issues that are often observed in certain remote areas of Sri Lanka. One such issue is that some students even have to either climb a tree or a rock in order to access transmission signals due to the lack of communication infrastructure facilities in that area. Hence, 'Remote learning via online mode' has become a huge challenge, especially for rural student communities in Sri Lanka and as a result, a huge gap has been created in terms of the opportunities given for HE. This may possibly lead to undesirable repercussions such as high dropout rates and youth discontent in those areas.

'Remote teaching via online' has become a formidable challenge for the HE teachers as well. The initial challenge for them had been the need to convert all courses delivered in the face-to-face mode to online mode at short notice without a proper training. This requirement imposed an additional stress on the faculty staff who were already struggling to make teaching and learning effective, balance the workload in terms of teaching, research and administrative duties in addition to streamlining the work-life balance. During design and preparation of the online content and also during delivery of the same, most faculty staff lacked the pedagogical and technical competencies respectively, needed for teaching via online. Their main challenge was to master the skills related to content development and delivery tools, communication platforms, organizing workflows etc. within a very short period of time. Moreover, those who were working-from-home were compelled to use their own resources while possessing limited technical expertise for teaching via online with inadequate technical and administrative support from the University. Some often experienced technical issues with their personal devices and/or in communication, causing disruptions in the delivery of the course. Challenges in conducting assessments via online needs a separate analysis and it is beyond the scope of this article.

This article made an attempt to highlight some of the challenges and issues faced by both students and faculty staff in conducting 'Remote teaching and learning via online mode' in light of the COVID-19 pandemic in a nutshell. It is worth ending by posing few questions. Has any comprehensive analysis on the effectiveness of 'Remote teaching and learning via online' been conducted after having implemented the same in the HE sector of Sri Lanka for nearly two years? If so, have the challenges and issues been identified? What action has already been taken or will be taken to rectify them? Responding to the aforesaid questions positively and taking appropriate action by the respective authorities are instrumental for the upliftment of the HE sector of Sri Lanka in the present context.

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# Teaching philosophy as a motivational tool to identify students' learning styles...

Teaching philosophy (TP) should be a small version of the big picture that describes the whole process of not only the teacher's teaching but also the students' learning. It is true that there are many pedagogical theories in higher education (HE) which can be integrated when developing our own TP, but the problem is, do we have a clear vison on learning ability and skills of our main stakeholders who are the students? With regard to this, as a teacher in HE, I like to follow the metaphor: "teachers are gardeners and students are plants" which accurately describes the teacher's duty towards the students. If someone is pouring water to the plants which are covered by umbrellas, how can we see the growth of the plants? Likewise, if the teacher cannot open their eyes to students learning styles in the classroom, a well-structured TP will be useless. Therefore, intended outcome of this article is to stimulate the teacher's mind to develop their own TP which focuses on students' learning styles.

My TP is basically constructed on three pillars, which are; being a level 3 teacher, moving teaching climates from X to Y and Bigg's 3-P model. Level 3 teachers always target on active learning and consider teaching as supporting learning (Biggs, 1999). Existence of teaching climate Y in a classroom allows to create a comfortable environment for the students' learning process (Erkilic, 2008). However, without knowing learning styles of the students in the classroom, any effort we make to follow the above-mentioned theories is akin to carrying water in a sieve. Therefore, Bigg's 3-P model is useful at this point to know student learning styles (Kolmos, 2009) before deciding the

teaching process. Presage stage of the Bigg's 3-P model initiates the process of knowing students well. Applying various tools such as VARK (Visual, Aural, Read/write, and Kinesthetic) questionnaire (Fleming, n.d.), can be found as important in this regard. Also, using the Multiple Intelligence (MI) teaching style questionnaire (Tanner, 2000) throughout the process gives a step in the right direction to match the teacher's teaching style with the learning preference of the students. However, having significantly different learning styles among the students is a big challenge for a teacher to run the teaching process effectively. In order to meet this challenge, Bigg's 3-P model pushes the teacher to use a range of teaching and learning techniques to give equal chance of learning opportunities to each student in the classroom (Dhanushika, 2018).

Finally, I would like to wrap-up the ideas given in this article with following thought-provoking sentences: Teachers are second parents to students. If we, as teachers, could be more serious about our teaching process, our dedication and good heart will produce a 'quality' human in the future. Hence, it is hoped that this article is an eye opener for those who want to become a teacher with "***good heart and brain***".

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# Importance of motivation in the educational environment ...

Many aspects related to teaching and learning (T&L) have been explicitly addressed and extensively discussed in academia with the objective of improving the targeted outcomes of education. When different T & L interventions having strong evidence of success are executed in the classroom to improve student performance, it has been seen that the students' innate baseline level of interest on the activity is often reflected in their performance irrespective of the intervention. Therefore, stimulating students' interest might generate far more success in improving student performance overall, with motivation playing a leading role. Lack of motivation has been identified as a major aspect that undermines students' learning process. Therefore, it could probably be one of the most significant targets for improving students' overall achievements (dos Santos et al, 2016; Vero & Puka, 2017). As per Redondo & Martin (2015), motivation triggers students to initiate a learning activity with their own interest as well as continue and sustain it life-long. The reasons for the motivation could highly vary in different individual contexts. Various strategies can be used to instil motivation particularly with the use of instructions facilitating cognitive learning (Pintrich, 2003). In order to trigger the students' motivation, basic elements such as showing the direction of the study, stimulated discussions on the scope, facilitating exploration and deep reflection to revise should be included in the teaching process (Ostinelli, 2016). In classrooms, the immediate advantages as well as life-long advantages of each T & L activity can be delivered to the students with a greater emphasis prior to the commencement of the activity. Further, it would be more effective to explain the importance of each T&L activity with the help of obvious examples applicable to their particular study. It would be intriguing if the educators are able to make the students themselves comprehend the shortcomings of lack of motivation through a planned set of T & L activities. Learning tasks can be developed in a scaffold manner where the knowledge and skills earned from the first set of tasks are indispensable to execute the next level. This would be particularly useful as it has been shown that independent tasks which are designed without any attention on interdependent skills were less useful in instilling motivation in students' learning process.

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**"Nine-tenths of education is encouragement."**

**by Anatole France**
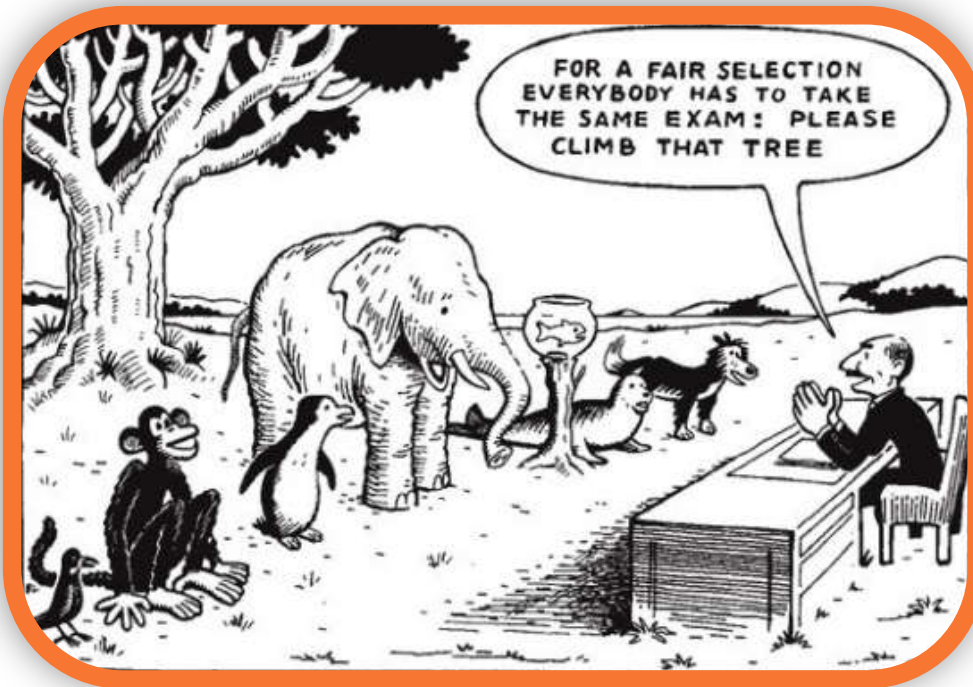
# Thought Provoking Corner



Image via **https://blogs.glowscotland.org.uk/glowblogs/dnsuodeportfolio1/tag/teamwork**



FOR A FAIR SELECTION EVERYBODY HAS TO TAKE THE SAME EXAM: PLEASE CLIMB THAT TREE

*Image via* **https://lessoninmotivation.wordpress.com/tag/teacher/**



I TAUGHT STRIPE HOW TO WHISTLE

I DON'T HEAR HIM WHISTLING

I SAID I TAUGHT HIM. I DIDN'T SAY HE LEARNED IT

BUD BLAKE 5-6

*Image by* **Bud Blake** *via* **https://clueylearning.com.au/blog/difference-between-teaching-and-learning**

# Workshop on Constructive Alignment

The SLAIHEE conducted a workshop on Constructive Alignment (CA) on 04th March 2022 from 9.00 am to12.00 noon via *Zoom* online mode. Twenty one participants from different higher educational institutions attended. The intended learning outcomes of the workshop identified were that participants will be able to;

(a) discuss the three pillars of CA

(b) distinguish between constructively aligned and non-aligned course curricula, and

(c) align three pillars of CA of a course: intended learning outcomes, teaching-learning activities and assessment tasks

The facilitators of the workshop, Dr. Priyantha Bandara and Prof. Kumari Fernando, welcomed the participants on behalf of SLAIHEE.

The concept of CA was discussed through different teaching-learning activities such as quizzes, group discussions, presentations etc. Several instructional media such as *Mentimeter* interactive presentation tool, PowerPoint presentations, Multimedia videos were utilized in order to facilitate the workshop with some interactive activities in the virtual environment. *Zoom* has been used as the online communication platform and the majority of interactions between the participants and the resource persons took place via *Chat box*. The *Breakout Room* facility in *Zoom* was also used. Five *Breakout Rooms* were used to facilitate group activity that allowed participants to discuss their course outlines as well as the issues that they had faced when they align teaching, learning and assessment. Participants were grouped based on their respective areas of teaching/specialization as much as possible, in order to enable productive discussions. Each group revisited module descriptors/course outlines in their area of expertise in view of the application of CA and to rectify possible issues in the alignment of pillars of CA. Participants were motivated to give feedback on the aspects presented by their peer groups.

Conducting a workshop of this nature via online has been a formidable challenge. However, the experience that we gained, as resource persons, under these circumstances has been instrumental in our professional development. Feedback from participants were taken and the workshop closed around 12.00 noon. Participants' feedback showed that 56% rated the workshop as "Excellent" and 25% as "Very Good". The majority of participants requested to conduct the workshop in the physical mode in future and to discuss more theoretical aspects related to teaching, learning and assessment. The workshop has been a fruitful experience for both resource persons and participants.

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"Constructive alignment is an example of outcomes-based education (OBE)"

by John Biggs

# 17th Annual SLAIHEE Conference
## "Developing self-aware & self-directed students and staff"

SLAIHEE has organized it's 17th annual conference with the aim of providing opportunity for Sri Lanka's academia to document and discuss the teaching and learning improvements/ developments that they have been able to achieve through their subject-related teaching. The theme of the conference was chosen as "***Developing self-aware & self-directed students and staff***" because both teachers and students are globally passing through challenging era due to COVID19 pandemic and they had to shift from face-face learning to remote online/ hybrid mode. The conference was successfully held on the **30th of July 2021**, online via Zoom and followed by the AGM of SLAIHEE. **Professor Pulani Lanerolle**, Professor in Nutrition and Chair, Department of Biochemistry & Molecular Biology, University of Colombo, delivered the keynote address on "**Towards Excellence: Effective Reflection**".

We summaries, by incorporating in a model of the Kolb Cycle, the Teaching and Learning techniques and enhancements presented at the conference full papers published in the conference proceeding (https://www.slaihee.org/17th-conference-2021).

Figure 1, below, in the form of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, indicates how teachers may have overcome the problems they faced with their teaching, student learning and assessment, and the stepwise action research processes including conceptualization, applying methods and techniques, gathering evidence (data) and reflecting on the same in order to make changes in their mindset and practices in making improvements to their HE practices.

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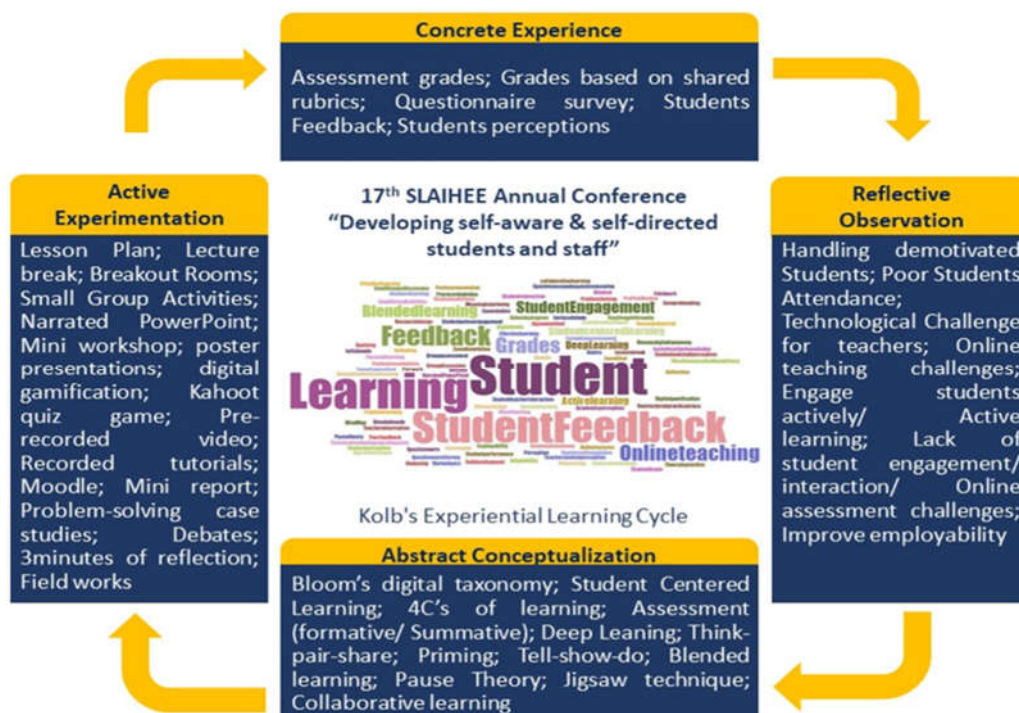*Faculty of Arts, University of Colombo.*



Figure 1. Summary of Experiential Learnings of the 17th SLAIHEE Conference presentations in the form of Kolb's Learning Circle  (Source: Kolb, D. A. (1984). Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development (Vol. 1). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall)

# Discussion Series on Professor Gibbs' 'Powerful Ideas'

The Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education (SLAIHEE) periodically organises workshops and discussions to facilitate improvement in Higher Education (HE) teaching and learning in Sri Lanka. To this end, in 2020 - 2021, SLAIHEE conducted a discussion series based on writings by Professor Graham Gibbs from Oxford University. Professor Gibbs has been involved in developing HE teaching for many years and his books on the subject contain practical methods and solutions to tackle common issues faced by teaching staff. The one-hour Zoom discussion series was based on selected writings from his '53 Powerful ideas all teachers should know about' (https://www.seda.ac.uk/53-powerful-ideas/). For each session, participants were provided reading material (the selected 'ideas paper') at pre-registration, along with preparatory 'homework'. At the discussions, use of *Mentimeter* polls and chat messages encouraged audience engagement.

The first one-hour online discussion was held on 15th October 2020 on the topic, 'Transferable skills rarely transfer'(publications_147_3 Transferable skills rarely transfer.pdf (seda.ac.uk)). In this session participants were first introduced to the concept of 'learning transfer' (i.e. transfer of training from the context in which it was taught, or acquired practically to subsequent and different contexts). Thereafter, they were encouraged to analyse the reasons why students' learning transfer may fail.

Following this, methods that could be used to

**Source:** http://bryanpenprase.org/uncategorized/graham-gibbs-and-teaching-excellence

overcome this transfer failure problem, such as the use of rubrics by the students for self-regulation were discussed. An interesting idea brought out through this discussion was the concept of activating lifelong-learning by 'learning the skill of transfer', but was shown to become possible only after several successful rounds of 'learning to transfer a (specific) skill'. The discussion leaders for the session were Professor Suki Ekaratne and Dr Iroja Caldera. Due to excessive numbers who pre-registered for this session it was repeated two months later.

A second topic, 'Students are trying to get different things out of being at university' (publications_145_Idea1 Students are trying to get different things out of being at university.pdf (seda.ac.uk)) was discussed online by the above resource persons on 18th December 2020. Here, how the educational intentions of HE students impacted their learning behaviour was looked at in depth. Various teaching and learning

methods capable of reorienting student behaviours were introduced and it included use of a process for skill development, the KWL (Know, Want to know, Learnt) table and self-regulating time management. The feasibility of positively influencing a change in students' behaviour was brought up at the end of the discussion and it was accepted that it could be achieved with suitable teacher training.

The third discussion session was conducted on 30th April 2021 by Professor Suki Ekaratne and Dr Thillai Sivakumar, based on the idea-paper 'It has more impact on educational effectiveness to change learners, than it does to change teachers'(publications_153_8 It has more impact on educational effectiveness to change learners than it does to change teachers.pdf (seda.ac.uk)). In this session, the different change strategies used to improve learning and those most likely to have a positive impact were first identified. Thereafter, participants analysed the impact of bad teaching in their own experience and how it could be overcome. The changes in the students seen in the 'ideas paper' were reviewed and several teaching tools were introduced. The importance of developing metacognitive awareness in the learners and the role played by motivation were stressed at this session.

Overall, the discussion series received very positive participant feedback. It is hoped that sessions such as these will pave the way to improve HE teaching and learning in Sri Lanka.

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**"Powerful Ideas All Teachers Should Know About …**
43. Most assessment involves (unreliable) professional judgement – and is all the better for it
42. 'Student engagement' is a slippery concept
41. Rewarding excellent teachers may not improve teaching much
40. Self assessment is central to intrinsic motivation
39. Student choice often lacks substance
38. Clearly stated goals are not always helpful to students
37. You cannot design learning activities until you are clear about your outcomes
36. Standards applied to teaching are lower than standards applied to research
35. Conventional higher education does a poor job of facilitating learning transfer
34. Courses work as integrated systems
33. Motivating students is not magic
32. Students don't always learn from experience
31. Much learning is acquired by doing, but seldom only by doing
30. Departments differ widely in their teaching quality
29. Students approach topic areas in different ways
28. Making feedback work involves more than giving feedback Part 2 The students
27. Making feedback work involves more than giving feedback Part 1 the assessment context
26. Students are selectively negligent, and successful students neglect the right stuff
25. Fear and anxiety are the enemies of learning
24. Students have limited attention
23. There is such a thing as too much information
22. There is often a gap between teacher's thinking and practice
21. The most useful training of university teachers does not 'involve' training
20. Lectures are used far too often
19. Class size matters
18. You can measure and judge teaching
17. Research can help student learning
16. It is difficult to demonstrate that students benefit from their teachers also being researchers
15. Ideas and concepts being taught may not replace students existing ideas
14. Universities (and departments) have quite different organisational cultures and some of these cultures help teaching more than others
13. Teachers' beliefs and practices are framed by their social setting
12. Teaching is driven by beliefs and assumptions
11. Students do not necessarily know what is good for them
10. Students' marks are often determined as much by the way assessment is configured as by how much students have learnt
9. Many patterns of teaching in HE simply follow conventions
8. It has more impact on educational effectiveness to change learners than it does to change teachers
7. Students' expectations are formed early
6. Learning takes effort
5. Much of what is learnt is forgotten
4. Good student performance is achieved in different ways than learning gains
3. Transferable skills rarely transfer
2. Students respond to clear and high expectations
1. Students are trying to get different things out of being at university **"**

**Source: https://www.seda.ac.uk/53-powerful-ideas**

## JOIN WITH US FOR SLAIHEE FUTURE EVENTS...

⇒ Upcoming Annual Conferences

⇒ Upcoming Workshops                    www. slaihee.org

⇒ Upcoming Discussion Series

## SLAIHEE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE 2020/22

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## CONTACT US...

Suggestions & comments

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## WRITE TO US...

Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness (SLAIHEE),
c/o, Prof. Sunethra Perera, Department of Demography,
Faculty of Arts,
University of Colombo, Colombo-03,
Sri Lanka.

"if we have good practices,
then we need to identify, spread and
sustain these, before
other practices grow their roots still deeper,
too deep to dig them out!"

Prof. SUKE
Founding President,
SLAIHEE