

**+THE GLOBAL HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEM AND THE KNOWLEDGE HUB IN
SRI LANKA : THE WAY FORWARD**

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Introduction

Your Excellency the Higher Commissioner for Sri Lanka, Mr. Edward Jayatunge, distinguished participants, members of the organizing committee of this event, and Ladies and Gentleman.

It is a privilege and a pleasure to deliver this oration at the 27th Annual General Meeting of the Sri Lanka Quantity Surveyors Association in Dubai. Therefore, I would like to thank the chairman and the organizers of this event for their kind invitation. Let me take this opportunity to congratulate the association for 17 years of valued service.

Sri Lanka is a unique developing country in South Asia. The main characteristic of the demographic structure is that the child population shows a declining trend while the youth population will continue to form a sizable proportion of the population till 2020. According to Professor Indralal de Silva an eminent demographer the decline in the child population by the year 2000 was an economic impetus and the period 2001-2016 is termed as the period with a demographic bonus so vital for economic growth. That is one of the reasons that Sri Lanka was able to sustain economic growth in spite of the civil war for thirty years. The second factor is that the state system proved to be resilient to nearly 30 years of civil strife and has been able to establish a post conflict recovery process that is moving towards consolidating peace. Although service delivery was hampered and the social and economic gains eroded the democratic processes and the state structure remained relatively intact facilitating a faster process of post conflict recovery.

Therefore I thought that it might be opportune to focus on the Global Higher Education System and the Knowledge Hub in Sri Lanka: A Way Forward. The main objective of this speech is to examine the nexus between the Global Higher Education System and the changes and

challenges of university education in Sri Lanka. More specifically, it examines the viability, potential and trajectory of the knowledge hub as a solution to problems and challenges in higher education in the country. The basic argument of the presentation is that the modernization of higher education lies in implementing structural changes that are concurrent to changes that are taking place at the international level in higher education.

The paper is divided into five major sections. The first part examines the System of global higher education. The second part deals with the origin, development and present status of university education in Sri Lanka. The third part deals with the knowledge hub, advantages, opportunities and challenges, while the fourth part of the paper deals with the observations and suggestions. The fifth and final part is the way forward.

Changes in the Global Higher Education System

Prior to examine present status of world university system, it is necessary have at look on what is university and its purposes and functions. University is not a collection of building but a community or society. The world university is derived from the Latin “universitas magistrorum et scholarium” roughly meaning “Community of teachers and scholars. It is a intellectual unit. Hence it is completely deferent from the school. The university has been a symbol of human integrity, a trustee for civilization, and intellectual community. It is mainly created for discovery of knowledge. Therefore, some universities are in the world for only post-graduate studies. Higher education particularly university education is a continuous process of imparting knowledge developing skills, inculcating values and promoting the overall personality development of human beings.

As we all aware, universities are among the oldest institutions in continuous operation.. The origin of universities in keeping with the ancient western model goes back to medieval Europe with the establishment of Bologna (1088), Paris (1150), Oxford (1167), and Cambridge (1209). The University of Nalanda as a seat of Buddhist learning in India was founded in the 5th century B.C. and was destroyed in 1100 A.D. Some universities established in this period collapsed in the period of renascence, and some collapsed in the period industrial period. First, the university was close to the church and later on with the development of nation state got close to the state.

Currently, it is tilting between the state and the market. The argument is universities should be able to change with the changes taken place in the global and national situation.

The oldest universities in the United Kingdom (UK) such as Oxford and Cambridge were founded as Church Universities with a view to training clergymen and teachers. However, the university in its modern sense started in the later part of the 19th century which is classically developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt and Cardinal Newman. They had a more secularized curricula and teaching and research were their main objectives. The first such university was the University College of London established in 1826. It was referred to as the first godless university in England. The industrial revolution, expansion of universal franchise and the rise of professional societies contributed to the establishment of civic universities such as Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, and Bristol in Britain.

Colonialism was a main force in spreading university education in developing countries. The colonial masters particularly the British established universities in their colonies. Other countries that did not have any colonial experience such as Japan, Thailand and Ethiopia established the western model of universities. The medium of language of university education also changed with the expansion of the university system. Initially Latin and later German dominated scholarship and science whereas English is the academic language now.

Higher education is not an isolated phenomenon subject to the vagaries of external and internal pressure. However, there is a strong belief that universities and cemeteries are not willing to change or move but both have to change due to internal and external forces. Let us take the external pressure. They are due to globalization and internationalization and multi-nationalization of university education. Globalization comprises broad economic, political and other trends and it also involves Information Communication Technology (ICT), the use of English, the rise of the private universities, the marketisation of higher education, and related aspects that are more or less inevitable results of the rapidly diversifying and changing global environment.

Internationalization means a package of policies that government or education institutions develop to cope with the global environment such as providing academic programmes in foreign languages and sponsoring students to continue their studies abroad. Multinationalization means offering a country's programmes in other countries. It covers the application of another country's education programmes, and adapts courses and syllabi in a country's context responding to the

needs and desire to be part of globalization. Multi-nationalization functions by means of branch campuses, franchising, joint degree offering institutions called twining, online programmes, distance mode of delivery and e-learning. As a result, well established universities are setting up offshore or branch campuses in other countries. Australia is proactive in the process of branch campuses and Singapore has been particularly receptive of such branch campuses. It is referred to as the McDonalization of higher education.

In the case of internal pressure, it is evident that enormous pressure is exerted on university education by demographic changes, the concept of the knowledge economy, development of primary and secondary education and the expansion of technology and communication. The breaking down of barriers in transport and emigration and immigration, formation of trade alliances and trade in higher education services by the World Trade Organization's (WTO) General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) and the European Union (EU), and the Bologna process has revolutionized understanding and practice in higher education globally as well as locally.

There have been significant effects of Globalization and internationalization. Of them, access quality and relevance are noteworthy. The demand for access and the provision of access to higher Education has been rising rapidly all over the world. In the late 1960s there was no country in West Europe where the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) was higher than 8 percent. Currently, the GER is more than 35 per cent. As a result, the model of university education has changed from elite to mass. At present more than 2.8 million students are studying outside their home countries. This number will increase to eight million by the year 2020.

The second significant impact has been the quality of higher education. The quality of higher education is measured on the basis of the following criteria: modernized classrooms, libraries, laboratories, study halls, syllabi, and methods of teaching and evaluation.

Currently the strongest British universities such as Oxford, Cambridge, College of London, Imperial College of London, and Yale, Harvard, Stanford, Berkeley, and M.I.T. in the U.S receive worldwide admiration and respect for their leadership in research and education. They excel in the advancement of human knowledge of nature and culture, they provide the best training to the next generation of scholarship; and they provide outstanding undergraduates and professional education

for those who will emerge from all walks of life. Consequently, they are referred to as World Class universities.

Simultaneously, Asian countries such as Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, China and India seek to expand the capacity of their system of university education. The Global changes have made a significant impact to improve equity. In order to improve equity universities have to offer scholarships and fellowships to the high achieving students from poor families or disadvantaged regions. It is widely believed that poor but talented students get more opportunity to enroll in higher education through scholarship programmes where tuition fees are charged than in countries with free education

Thus, the main challenge before the university education is increase access and quality while maintain equity. To overcome these situation countries has initiate reforming existing higher education in the country. The initiative of the member countries of the European Union (EU) referred as a “ bologna process” which proposed a restructuring an under=graduate and post-graduate programme and transfer of credit system, at European level. The world Trade organization (WTO) through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has encourage set of private higher educational among its member countries. It has already contributed a world-wide debate on whether higher education for public good or private good. If it is for private good the higher education should be able to sale as a service like any other products. Sri Lanka too is not able to be silent regarding changes taken place at global level.

Origin and Development

The origin and development of university education in Sri Lanka goes back to the latter part of British rule. The establishment of the University College in 1921 marked the beginning of university education in the country. It prepared students to sit the external degree of the University of London. The University of Ceylon established in 1942 by the amalgamation of the University College and the Medical College in Colombo was the first native university with power to offer degrees. The university followed the model of Oxford and Cambridge popularly known as the ox-bridge model. From the inception up to recent times university education was dominated by state universities. As a result, there are 14 universities with three campuses, one Open University, 09 undergraduate and 7 postgraduate institutes under the purview of the University Grants

Commission. Almost 80,000 internal students and 200,000 external students are studying at our universities that follow the pattern of British Universities. It was exactly the model of elite education.

However, university education underwent many changes especially with the granting of universal franchise in 1931, free education in 1945, the political changes in 1956 and the introduction of university education in Sinhala and Tamil Languages in 1959. It marked the beginning of the inclusion of students from a wide ranging socio-economic background. Consequently, the number of universities increased from one in 1942 to three in 1960. Two of these new universities Vidyodaya (Kelaniya) and Vidyalankaraya (Sri Jayewardenepura) were Buddhist pirivenas (monastic institutions) which were elevated to the status of universities¹. To accommodate an increased demand of university education ad hoc measures such as creating another Faculty of Arts in Colombo and a Faculty of Science in Peradeniya was taken by the government. By 1970 the number of universities increased to five and by 1978 there were seven universities in the country. The rest were established after 1994.

The number of students entering higher education thus increased from 1612 in 1948, to 5000 in 1959, to about 14,000 in 1970 and 17, 449 student enrolments in 1978. By 1988/89 there were 29,781 students internally in university education. At present, 80, 000 students are in universities. Annually about 13,000 internal graduates pass out from universities and more than 50 percent of them are from the Arts and management streams. The output of external graduates is around 6,500 and the Open University too has an output of about 500 per year. Thirty years ago 70 percent of the student population was admitted to the faculties of Social Sciences and Humanities. In addition, since 1962, there has been a system of external examinations in university education and almost 200,000 students are registered with the eleven universities in the country.

Currently, there are 14 conventional universities, three campuses, one Open University, 9 undergraduate and 7 post-graduate institutes, 9 degree awarding institutes under the purview of the University Grants Commission. Besides, there are two religious universities under the Ministry of Higher Education. There is one university under the Ministry of Defense, and one under the Ministry of Vocational Training. The 19, universities provide higher education under the principle of Free Education but the right to education defines free education as equity in access and quality

which we find questionable. The exact statistics are not available regarding the number of students in universities overseas. According to estimates of the UGC nearly 8000-10000 students leave the country for higher education annually.

Issues and Challenges

The biggest challenge facing our university education is ensuring equal opportunity in access and equity in the quality of education. In 2010 54,000 applied for 22,000 placements at our universities. The Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) the ratio of students enrolled in higher education to the size of the age cohort between 18 to 24 years is close upon 16 per cent. The UGC is planning to increase the GER up to 20 per cent in 2016 and 30 per cent in 2020. It is essential to maintain the GER to the level of 20 per cent to move to a knowledge economy.

The challenge before us is to increase access to higher education while improving the quality of education. The curriculum and courses we offer should contribute to the production of a skilled labour force that meets the demands of the new millennium. The answer lies in changing the traditional model of teaching and learning measured by where we study and what we learned. New pressures such as alignment to industry and the demand of the workforce, the move to mass education, a geographically fluid workforce and mass communication have exacerbated the need to move away from rote learning to competency based education. Therefore, we need to redefine our programs to provide competencies for a new generation of learners.

The state monopoly in higher education has come under increasing pressure as the state has not been able to keep pace with the demand for higher education and diversify and increase access and quality at the same time. We at the UGC are grappling with issues of expanding access and quality and it is a well known fact that the state cannot allocate the financial resources required to meet these challenges and neither can the country find the human resources required to increase quality. Defense, countering adverse propaganda by a well organized international network and post conflict recovery continue to monopolize a large part of our resources and the state cannot maintain an extensive welfare package while stimulating economic growth.

Given the rapidly changing context globally as well as within Sri Lanka the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC are compelled to rethink its policies and strategies and as I said before forecast change and plan for change. If not we will be left behind and the forces of change

will continue in an unplanned and unregulated environment which is not conducive for the development of the country. Establishing Sri Lanka as a knowledge hub in South Asia is one such strategy that is being explored as option to address the pervasive issues affecting higher education in Sri Lanka.

Knowledge Hub

A Knowledge Hub is broadly defined as a designated region intended to attract foreign investment, retain local students, build a regional reputation by providing access to high-quality education and training for both international and domestic students, and create a knowledge-based economy. A knowledge hub is concerned with the process of building up a country's capacity to better integrate it with the world's increasing knowledge based economy, while simultaneously exploring policy options that have the potential to enhance economic growth. An education hub can include different combinations of domestic/international institutions, branch campuses, and foreign partnership, within the region. The main functions of hubs are to generate, apply, transfer, and disseminate knowledge.

The concept of a knowledge hub for Sri Lanka was proposed by His Excellency the President Mahinda Rajapaksa through his policy document during the presidential election in 2009. It is stated that Sri Lanka will “develop youth who can see the world over the horizon”. “We have the opportunity to make this country a knowledge hub within the South Asia region. I will develop and implement an operational plan to make this country a local and international training centre for knowledge”.

The Ministry of Higher Education is grappling with the empirical implications of translating this promise into reality. The Ministry has invited foreign universities to set up campuses to provide a more diversified higher Education programme to increase access for local students and to attract students from overseas to study in Sri Lanka. Just as in Singapore Sri Lanka's strategy is to piggy- back on internationally renowned universities so that the process is cost effective and mutually beneficial. Furthermore, it is planned that 10 branch campuses of “world class” universities would be established by 2013. The Knowledge Hub Agenda has given greater prominence especially to the fields of Science and Technology, Information and

Communication Technology, Skills Development, and Research and Development in Applied Sciences.

Malaysia is the first country in Asia that has strategically established itself as a knowledge hub admitting 100,000 overseas students, although the university education in Malaysia was introduced far later than Sri Lanka. It has a clear strategy to consolidate as an international hub for post graduate studies. Another successful hub is Hong Kong although its catchment area is more Southeast Asia than South Asia. Other countries such as India, Singapore, Viet Nam and Thailand are aspiring to establish a knowledge hub in their respective regions. India attracts 100,000 students annually while Hong Kong attracts 5,823, China 162,895, and Singapore 72,000 overseas students annually. Sri Lanka has a projected target of attracting 10,000 foreign students by 2014 which would increase to 100,000 by 2020.

Advantages

Sri Lanka enjoys several advantages to develop into an education hub. First, of all the ever increasing demand for higher education in the country is an impetus for growth and advancement. Annually, well over 250,000 students sit for the Advanced Level Examination and half of them are qualified for university education. However, only 22,000 are able to enter university education in the country. Of them, 9000 enroll in vocational training through 12 Advanced Technological Institutes, 20,000 enroll at the Open University, 8000, access overseas education, 20,000 register as external candidates while 9000 are studying for a foreign degree via cross border institutes. Nearly, 60,000 students are looking for alternative higher education locally.

Secondly, an Education Hub is necessary for the long-term viability of a country's economy and to generate employment. Sri Lanka is moving fast from an Agro-economy to a service economy and to a knowledge-based economy. To establish as a knowledge based economy, Sri Lanka has to prepare for intense competition from countries like Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand and Hong Kong. These countries have not only developed their higher education system but have focused on good Early Childhood Care and Development programme as well as primary and secondary education so that they create a local pool of high quality academics. They have diversified their courses, modernized the curriculum and updated the teaching learning process. The physical infrastructure, the legal framework and the social infrastructure is well

developed and they have invested in an efficient and effective bureaucracy and service sector. Therefore, Sri Lanka should be able to groom and attract talent locally, regionally and internationally and the whole country has to gear up for a paradigm shift including the political ideology.

Thirdly, Sri Lanka needs to develop high level skills due to her skewed demographic and labour force. Currently, Sri Lanka has an unusually large pool of labour force. At present, 83 percent of the labour force have educational attainment at GCE (O/L) or below of which 19.3 percent have a primary education or below. This problem is compounded by the aging of our population. Currently, for every elderly person aged 65 or over there are almost ten (10) people in the prime working age population (15-64) but this trend would reverse after 2020. Consequently, it is imperative for Sri Lanka to continue to elevate the overall skills of the general population. In order to develop the high end of the skills set, it is necessary to create an Education Hub in the country and consider the re-skilling of the labour force as well.

Fourthly, by making Sri Lanka as an Education Hub the country can facilitate a process of integration with the region and at the international level which is the key to our economic future. The presence of regional and international students at our national universities or branch campuses can enhance the quality of teaching and research faculty. It is a recognized fact that the importance of university based scientific research is drives economic growth. It would also increase the exposure of our students and enhance their knowledge on international affairs.

Last but not least, is the unique advantage of university autonomy and academic freedom which is not available in many countries aspiring to establish education hubs. The Magna Charta Observatory has defined university autonomy as follows: The University is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of its geographical and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises and hands down culture by means of research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political and economic power”.

Academic freedom is associated with the concept of university autonomy. The Dar Es Salam Declaration defines academic freedom as the right of the members of the academic community individually or collectively, to fulfill their functions of teaching, researching, writing, learning and disseminating information and providing services without fear or interference from

the state or any other public authority. Academic freedom is important especially for scholars who are used to the kind of open academic environment found in universities in western countries.

Opportunities and Challenges

Interest in Higher Education in Sri Lanka among international universities is growing rapidly. More than 60 cross border institutes are linked to the universities and higher education institutes in Australia, the United Kingdom (UK), Malaysia, India and United States of America (USA) and are offering certificate, Diploma and Degree programmes in the country. They are offering subjects ranging from Business Management, Information Technology, Bio-medical Sciences, Design and Engineering.

The end of the war against terrorism has opened new doors for attracting foreign universities to establish collaboration with local institutions or establish branch campuses in Sri Lanka. However, we need the social, academic and physical infrastructure to attract foreign universities and professional organizations to extend their services from Sri Lanka and set Sri Lanka on the path of becoming a knowledge hub.

We also need to change the narrow perspectives of our local academia and students to facilitate such a process as they have to be prepared to compete with such institutions and produce graduates who are on par or exceed those from the cross border or branch campuses.

Student unrest, destabilization and propensity for violence in universities are a major threat to university education in the country.

Step Taken and Needs to be Taken

There is a great potential for converting higher education in Sri Lanka as a regional knowledge hub. As a result foreign universities are able to offer courses/programs in technology, and vocational education and post graduate education. However, the existing University Act of 1978 does not have provision to establish private universities either local or international. Therefore, a separate Higher Education Act for national and international universities and branch Campuses as in Malaysia and Bangladesh has been prepared and is subject to be placed before Parliament.

The need to change the role of the State, the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC as the main provider of Higher Education to a regulator and protector of higher education is imperative. Therefore, an Accreditation and Quality Assurance Board has to be established to monitor quality in both state and non state sector providers of university education. The said bill is being prepared.

The government has taken steps to raise the standards of six universities in Sri Lanka up to international level. These selected universities are Peradeniya, Colombo, Moratuwa, Sri Jayawardenapura, Kelaniya, and Ruhuna. A survey conducted in October in 2010 showed that the University of Colombo was ranked 2185, the University of Moratuwa 2198, and the University of Peradeniya 3005 in the Web metrics Global ranking. It is a fact that many universities are not wealthy enough to pay for this evaluation on which the global ranking is made. However, Sri Lanka needs to make every effort to get into the exclusive club of world class universities in the world in order to be an education hub in the region.

State universities must be responsive to changes of higher education that flow from changes taking place in the global and regional spheres. Currently, they are concerned with academic and intellectual development but they have to change the teaching and learning process as well as governance and management which calls for a very high level of efficiency and effectiveness.

Way Forward

In this respect what is the way forward. At present we are going through a transitional state in the Sri Lankan political and socio-economic scenario. Currently, the government monopoly of higher education is relaxed due to the presence of the non state sector attributed to the processes of globalization, internationalization and commercialization of higher education. Consequently, a two tier higher education system has emerged. The prospect looks good for the development of Sri Lanka as a regional centre for educational excellence.

The concept of a Knowledge Hub in Sri Lanka is viable in the post conflict macro-economic environment. It could be an incentive to stimulate the rapid expansion of state and non state university education in the country. It would also complement the other proposed hubs of energy, trade, air and naval. However, we have to recognize that the concept of the knowledge

hub is highly dependent on the overall development of the country and good governance. If not it will be confined to rhetoric that will give rise to agitation and turmoil. It is an honour and a privilege to present these thoughts before the Sri Lankan professionals on the occasion of the 27 annual general meeting of the Quantity Surveyors Association. Thank you very much for your kind attention during my speech. I wish you all the success.
