Wishful Thinking and World Bank Money: Exploring the Capacity to Build Social Goods within Conditionalities and Corporatization

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Abstract - A significant critique of the World Bank's problematic role in public higher education is that through its conditionalities it paves the way for privatization and a deterioration of public education systems. In Sri Lankan universities, as in other countries, programmes in higher education using such loan monies became entry points for corporatized discourses and practices, changing how universities perceive themselves. In such instances, institutions and individuals may find that the space to resist or change such discourses is negligible. This paper examines the possibilities available within such a corporatized space for a venture that is antithetical to such corporatized discourses. The case study for this is an accessibility programme supported by World Bank loans. Through interviews and text analysis I explore how recipients of loan monies work within conditionalities and corporatizing discourses to produce what could be called a social good.

Keywords - *Corporatization, Disability, Sri Lanka, Universities, World Bank*

Introduction

Increased attention has been paid globally, and more recently in Sri Lanka, to the impact of the World Bank's loan cycles on state (or public) universities. The World Bank's position on higher education is well known. Funding on education should be concentrated on primary education rather than higher education and higher education should be funded by private funds of citizens (Desmond, 2002; Stephen P. Heyneman, 2012). For Sri Lanka, which has shown a strong resistance to explicit maneuvers of privatization by governments, this has meant conditionalities that do not formally privatize but are pathways to discourses aligned with privatization: corporatization, a culture of auditing, and mechanisms of quality 'assurance' (Perera, 2020).

The discourses – and therefore the lived experience - of privatization can be felt and seen as an overwhelming tide that sweeps everything in its way. Academics may feel that there is little agency for projects that are of a different

ethos. In such spaces, inquiry into possibilities for change become very important. This paper presents a situation of such possibility by examining a programme that aims to make a university community disability-aware and the learning-teaching space accessible. The study is at a nascent stage but I present preliminary understandings of what it takes to make room for such a venture in this corporatized space of Sri Lankan public universities.

The paper moves now to present the context of World Bank loan projects in Sri Lankan universities, situating them within the global experience of such loans in higher education. The methods and data are described next, with an analysis of the programme thereafter. Some concluding thoughts follow.

The Local and Global Context of World Bank Loans and Universities

By the end of 2022, the World Bank's third cycle of loans to Sri Lankan higher education comes to an end. The current cycle started in 2017. Table 1 provides a summary of all three loans to Sri Lankan universities, excerpted from (Perera, 2021, p.46).

TABLE 1. DETAILS OF WORLD BANK LOANS FOR THE HIGHER EDUCATION SECTOR 2003-2023

Name of loan cycle	Duration	Loan amount (in US$)
Improving Relevance and Quality in Undergraduate Education (IRQUE)	2003-2010	40.3 million
Higher Education for the Twenty-First Century Project (HETC)	2010-2016	40 million
Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development Operation Project (AHEAD)	2017-2023	100 million

Over these past two decades, Sri Lankan governments have spent approximately 2% of its GDP on the education sector annually, of which only a percentage is sent to state universities. The loan cycles correspond to this period

and supplemented the scarce funds available to state universities. By 2003, the universities had been severely under-funded for decades, without even the most basic resources. During interviews in the 2012-2014 period, academics reminisced that their workspaces received multimedia projectors, library books, computers and air conditioning via the loan projects. The loan projects, they said, "gave us some material resources that we very, very badly needed. We were stuck in the seventies as far as technology was concerned" (quoted from Perera, 2021). Another academic interviewed by Wijetunga (2021) pointed out the lack of investment in research: "if you look at the countries like Korea, GERD [Gross Expenditure on Research and Development] is about 4% of the GDP… . If I remember correctly the last report was done in 2014 or 2015 – it was around 0.1% in Sri Lanka" (p.46). These experiences of austerity contextualize the support and generally positive regard towards World Bank loans from academics in state universities. While the World Bank loans supplemented the moneys sent by the Treasury to the universities, unlike state funds, the loans are accompanied by specific conditions. The more explicitly stated conditions were related to quality assurance (QA) and wide-spread investments in increasing students' (and in some cases staff) proficiency of English as a Second Language (ESL) and knowledge of Information Technology (IT) (Perera, 2021). These seemingly benign conditions wrought major changes in universities, which I summarize below since that will illustrate better the working conditions of the programme that is presented in this paper as a case study.

The research arising on three cycles of the World Bank loans to Sri Lankan universities illustrates the divergent attitudes towards the Bank, and some of the problematic policy reforms that accompany its loans (Ilangakoon, 2006; Mendis, 2021; Perera, 2021; Wijetunga, 2021; Wikramanayake, 2015). In many ways, these changes are similar to that in other regions of the world (Brock-utne, 2007; Collins & Rhoads, 2010; Fischman, 1998; Regmi, 2016). First, the Bank's ideologies supporting the divestment of state funds from tertiary education leads to increased privatization of higher education. The encouragement of privatization, coupled with the scarce resources assigned to public higher education, have already been experienced in regions as diverse as Latin America (Desmond, 2002) and Asia (Regmi, 2016). In a similar vein, Sri Lankan universities have been coerced into generating more funds for their upkeep, a push strengthened by the financial difficulties of these last few years.

Second, the Bank's conditionalities exert changes to the forms of governance in higher education (S. P. Heyneman, 2003), through conditionalities

and their discourses on quality, accountability and employability (Collins, 2011; Regmi, 2016). The Bank sees education as a means of producing human capital, i.e., what is considered important when designing educational programs is what 'manpower' is needed for a country. Their measurements are also focused on 'rates of return' from investment into education, which generally mean that they support investment into primary education and not higher education (S. P. Heyneman, 2003).

This perspective is the dominant view of education in Sri Lanka currently. Accordingly, current discourses within Sri Lankan universities as well as outside assume that an academic degree's purpose is to impart a job-related skill; that all activities in universities should be relevant to such purpose; and that the value of activities is quantifiable and measurable. An illustration is provided by Mendis (2017), as she critiques the UGC's Program Review Manual (2015) for using the number of industrial placements for its students as a measurement of an academic programme's worth. Texts describing Bank-related project activities and other issues on universities show that administrators in the UGC and academics in public universities too have an uncritical acceptance of such discourses (e.g. Senaratne & Sivasegaram, 2012). Any ventures that need approval or validation by universities in this current context must mirror these discourses.

In addition to these general issues of World Bank related higher education projects, more specific issues related to project implementation are shown by recent research on the local context. National regulations on finance and auditing create stumbling blocks and significantly slow down the implementation of projects in universities (Perera, 2021; Wijetunga, 2021). Added to these difficulties is convoluted university bureaucracy that makes each step in the project activity a laboured effort. Long drawn-out procedures accompany taking tender notices; technology committee requirements routinely delays procurement, such that the price of goods is tripled when they are actually bought (interviews, 2022).

Workings of power and hierarchy within universities pose challenges as well. One, varying degrees of tension exist between academics and the officer cadre of the non-academic staff (field notes and interviews, 2012-2014). Interviewees from different universities cite bursars, registrars, works engineers as administrative officers that need to be approached with particular care when working on research and other projects to ensure that projects can be administered smoothly or at all. Secondly, the idealized critical edge that academia is expected to embody appears to be missing in present day. Many academics are silent or

prefer not to speak up against senior staff and refrain from making formal complaints about university administration (academic or non-academic) when they see that something is problematic or wrong (field notes and interviews, 2022). As in any other context, such silence makes it more difficult for the few individuals who do raise their voices.

Last but definitely not the least, a significant issue is the amount of loan money that is wasted. This may be unintentional. Proposal writers may be inexperienced in proposal writing. This happened during the initial two cycles of World Bank loan projects and may have happened in the current cycle as well, especially given that proposal writers are usually junior academics with little experience in project implementation or proposal writing (field notes and interviews, 2012-2014). Such waste can also be volitional. Some activities represent vanity projects that involve refurbishing little used spaces or buying equipment that lies unused thereafter. They may be patently superficial efforts, conceptualizing for example, a series of 2-hour workshops or a lecture on self-entrepreneurship that promise to increase students' employability. As a participant in Wijetunga's (2021) study argues, "the repayment of the loans is going to be a problem for the government. That's why it is very important to utilize the money in an appropriate manner for the very important activities" (p.52). In the next section, I describe how data was collected on a programme that was felt to be successful despite these multiple constraints.

Methodology

This paper presents findings from the early stages of a case study[1] on a programme that received funding through the AHEAD cycle of the World Bank's loans. While the case study is still at an early stage, the findings are informed and supplemented by my previous research on World Bank lending to universities in Sri Lanka (see Perera, 2020, 2021; Perera & Canagarajah, 2010).

The paper presents findings from project documentation and interviews. For this paper, I critically analyzed the *Guidelines for Proposal Submission – Faculty Development Projects* (2018) authored by the AHEAD project (hereafter 'Faculty DP'), and the Faculty's proposal for this project.

The interviews are from three key officials in the project at Faculty level. The participants consented to being interviewed while being aware that they

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[1] This case study is a part of a larger study on external aid to universities in Sri Lanka. Ethics approval for the current phase of this study was received in July 2021 from the Ethics Review Committee of the Social Sciences and Humanities of the University of Colombo.

could be identified by their involvement in the project, which was unique. As a means of ensuring confidentiality as much as possible, however, I will refrain from providing information on their current affiliations, and positions within the project and provide little contextual information of their identity. To supplement the data, I also use reflexive notes I kept on the project during these last three years.

A Different Project Activity

It is in this global and local context that I set out to explore how a programme that produces a social good rather than employability characteristics can be conceptualized and implemented. These are initial findings of a study on a 'project activity' considered virtuous.

In World-Bank-speak, loan money is provided for the institution, in this case a faculty, to implement a "project". The DP guidelines, which tell institutions how and what to apply for, is in the words of one of my participants, a "very powerful framework". It lays down the "eligibility" criteria, as well as "eligible activities" and, "eligible expenditures". Each "project" has a number of components, which are termed "project activities". For the AHEAD cycle, each Faculty was expected to have no more nor less than five activities, of which one must be on English language proficiency (Faculty DP, p.5). This case study is of one such "project activity" in a Faculty of Arts. The faculty requested Rs 20 million to implement this project activity titled "Creating an accessible and equal learning environment". The requested amount was roughly 20% of the value of the whole project by the Faculty.

The project activity was commonly referred to as the 'disability activity', since its objective was to provide a better learning (and teaching) environment to its students with disabilities and by extension, all students. It promised to do so by enacting the following three "sub-activities":

1. Create one sensitization and awareness course each for academic and non-academic staff respectively. It would cater to the specific needs of each group, i.e., a focus on pedagogy for the academics, and an administrative focus for the non-academic staff. The duration of each course would be three months, with a limited number of participants. The courses would be developed with the help of disability studies professionals and it would use such professionals as resource persons.

2. Develop the learning environment of students with disabilities by providing training, e.g. in the use of digital apps for reading or use of audiobooks, or in using the white cane for mobility.

3. Develop infrastructure in two selected office spaces that would be dedicated to supporting students with disabilities

I chose to look closely at this course because it was considered a "successful" course. This is an ambiguous term in relation to World Bank projects. World Bank project reports report the success of an activity or a project itself using numerical qualifiers (e.g. "84 %"). There are no qualitative or descriptive criteria for describing a project's success. Rather, it appears that success of a project is determined by the submission of documentation relating to completion (or non-completion). Evaluation criteria for projects do not include a consideration of the project's meaningfulness to project participants or recipients, or an assessment in terms of its social or intellectual value. Previous research has shown that projects using the Bank's loan monies are not always considered meaningful or successful by the participants (Perera, 2021).

When choosing this project activity for closer scrutiny, therefore, I used different criteria. From the beginning of this project activity, faculty members coming into contact with it referred to it with excitement and admiration. The Bank's project activities are usually understood to need the university community to work towards quality assurance criteria (e.g. employability measures) or further rankings amongst universities. However, this project activity was seen as virtuous and helpful, as something that would help the faculty deal with the conundrum of teaching students with disabilities. In informal conversations, staff who participated in the sensitization courses (including myself) and students who benefitted from an increased attention to and sensitivity towards disability rights and issues, referred to the changes happening via this activity as helpful and meaningful to their own lives. Faculty members spoke about how it made a difference in their understanding of (dis)ability.

What was the difference? Three main factors have emerged as contributors to the project activity's success.

1. Addressing a need

The Faculty has a larger proportion of students with disabilities. In addition to students with disabilities who enter through the general intake of the Faculty, the Faculty also accepts a separate cohort of students with disabilities, or an affirmative action. Therefore, the number of students with disabilities in the

Faculty has increased over the past decade. This has led to more intense discussions within the Faculty on disability's impact on teaching and learning. Catering to students with hearing, vision and mobility impairments alongside other students has been difficult for faculty members because this needs constant changes to the delivery of lectures and assessments. Printed reading material, for instance, does not allow a student with vision impairments to enlarge the fonts and read; a student with hearing impairments needs visual aids to be provided; a student with mobility difficulties is better served in a ground floor classroom if the Faculty has no lift. At times, a student with a disability was not identifiable at the beginning of a course; some students without visible disabilities may prefer not to identify themselves as a 'student with a disability'. Discussions at Faculty level showed that faculty members, while feeling sympathy (a common response was '*pawu*' / '*paawum*') and were charitable towards them, had little awareness of the rights of people. Overall, dealing with the increased number of such students was a worry, an anxiety, or a difficulty for academic and non-academic staff. Classroom management, alternative forms of assessments, the need for accessible bathrooms and classrooms were all matters that came up at the Faculty's review meetings and at times at Faculty Board meetings. The AHEAD loan cycle, therefore, created an opportunity to request funds to resolve some of these issues. The contents that were included in the proposal had already been germinating within the Faculty.

The proposal writers believed in this project activity as a morally necessary development for the Faculty. Yet, it was the high stress related to this matter over a number of years that underlay the Faculty's support for this project activity, which would take 20% of the value of the money provided to the Faculty. It had pragmatic value because the need for this was felt direly by the whole Faculty.

2. Purposeful use of a suitable discourse and style

For the project activity to be successful it had to be presented in 'World-Bank-speak'. In general, this means presenting an activity via its value for employability, showing its connections to quality assurance processes in the institution and presenting measurements of its value. While the programme - conceived in relation to pedagogy and awareness on disability - could be described as a project of social and moral value, it did not use a discourse of rights or social goods. Rather, the project proposal was written to suit the eligibility criteria of the Bank's DP guidelines. This meant that the style and register of writing mimicked the World Bank's discourse. For example, the project proposal stated that this activity would "improve the capacity of staff and administrators

to engage with the students with disabilities". It promised to create "Public Private Partnerships (PPP)" to ensure sustainability. Capacity-building, PPPs and sustainability are meaningful keywords in the neoliberal aid discourse, tying into the requirements of employability skill building, etc. Academics are trained in academic writing style, the dominant style associated with academia and research. Project writing necessitates a different writing style and academics working on external aid projects have had to learn this writing style and register as well. The proposal writers for this project activity were, serendipitously or not, able to write in the project-writing style, learnt through prior experience in similar projects both outside and within the university.

3. The fortunate circumstance of hiring s uitable people

The third and the most significant factor, according to the data, is that the success of the project was heavily people-dependent. Each individual working on the project activity had to be committed to this, and they were. Participants spoke of a "passion" for supporting students with disabilities or for equity in education. Like in any other loan project, this work is in addition to the academic's other commitments. It takes enormous time, energy and headspace and this passion is what allowed the individuals to put in the time and effort necessary.

An illustration of the manner in which changes were handled was given by the participants. During the Covid19 pandemic and the later political and economic crisis in Sri Lanka (during 2021-2022), many of the project activities were affected – most projects under AHEAD could not "meet targets". The disability project faced this difficulty when it did not train the number of staff members that had been promised in the project proposal through the three-month sensitization course. The 'target' was met by organizing a shorter online course. The participants saw this ability to change some of the actions in a way that suits the local context's problems as well as the loan project's requirements as (much needed) flexibility. They reported that some of the other activities in the loan project had not been as successful due to a lack of such flexibility.

At the same time, the changes they made had to suit the spirit in which the project activity had been undertaken. Amongst the staff of the project activity, there was debate at the time of this change whether it would be successful. Some academic staff members who took the course and the people involved in the activity were not sure whether a shorter online course would be as effective as a three-month, on-site course. In retrospect the staff working on the project activity argued that, while it was different in nature from a three-month sensitization

course, the shorter online course brought in more colleagues to the next three-month course and that it also made the course known to faculty members outside the Faculty.

The commitment of the staff members involved can be seen more significantly in the importance they gave to making the project activity sustainable. The resource people for the sensitization project were paid the UGC-approved rates, rather than a higher rate that was possible under the AHEAD loan project. This would ensure that there would be no change in payment rates when the project activity ended and the course could function on its own. Another example is the design of extension courses to teach braille and Sri Lankan Sign Language using the balance funds towards end of the project activity. The subjects of the courses were decided based on the needs of students[2]. They were designed as extension courses so that the university and the public could benefit from them and at the same time generate funds for the administration of the university's center for students with disabilities.

Work on the project activity was not always as ideal or wonderful as it sounds, however. Participants reiterated previous research findings about the university's administration as major stumbling blocks. They had to learn to navigate the university's academic and non-academic administration. University financial procedures are opaque, and have to be learnt while doing the work, resulting in lengthy delays which in turn, impact the state of progress of the project activity. Regardless of gender, individuals working on projects have to learn to "appease the egos" of (mostly) senior male academics and non-academic staff members to ensure a somewhat smooth functioning of the project activity. If project activity staff disagree or insist on certain processes and procedures, they ran the risk of being perceived as contradictory or irreverent of the university's hierarchies, a perception that could be harmful at times.

Altogether, these three factors are deceptively straightforward. To summarize, the project activity was successful – both in terms of virtue as well as 'meeting targets' - because it addressed a sorely felt need, was administered by individuals who could 'translate' something resembling a community project to a loan project proposal and because the staff worked hard to ensure that the project activity did not deviate from its envisioned nature.

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[2] The Faculty has noted that a sizeable proportion of blind students are unable to use Braille to write, and that a larger proportion of deaf or hard of hearing students do not have fluency in Sri Lankan Sign Language.

While these appear simple and straightforward factors, in the current state of universities, all such factors coinciding is an uncommon phenomenon. One or more of these factors is generally missing from many project activities of the three World Bank loan cycles. For example, some project activities might be ill-suited because it is designed to suit the Project DP requirements rather than the actual needs of an institution. It may waste money by funelling funds towards a vanity project rather than another felt need. At other times project activities may have to deviate from the proposed sub-activities because of the impact of national and university-wide regulations.

Additional implications abound. A subtle but frequent issue is that it is difficult to use World Bank-speak, or neoliberal discourses of quality assurance and auditing at will and still remain critical about these discourses. More often, academics become *believers*: immersed in the neoliberal discourse, unable to see the implications and consequences of these discourses and ensuing actions within universities, and willing members of the quality assurance and the auditing culture (e.g. Senaratne & Sivasegaram, 2012). Secondly, while passion and commitment to work are admirable, we should bear in mind that "being committed", and "getting the work done" have become legitimizing strategies for exploitation in corporatized universities (Erickson et al., 2020).

Conclusion

I end with some thoughts and questions. One is a question most relevant to the present times, as Sri Lanka faces an economic and political crisis brought about by unseemly debt. If we take loans, and in recent studies some academics have argued for the need for such loans (Perera, 2021; Wijetunga, 2021) how do we create the circumstances in such a way that a real need, purposeful discourse and suitable people – the three factors contributing to success in this project – are present in each project? And their co-occurrence is not an accident as in this case?

Dave Hill (2001) described the consequences of corporatization as "increased intensification of labour, with larger classes, especially in non-elite universities, and decreased autonomy" as well as "accompanying increases in levels of surveillance, monitoring and report-writing" (p. 212). Many of these issues are apparent in our universities at present and there are consequences. At Faculty Boards or Senates, there is less discussion and debate on the *principles* of education and more attention to 'administering'. Many Faculty or University unions are lethargic, facing difficulty in attracting faculty members as office bearers or for union action. Many academics are silent when decisions are made

for us: it is either too much trouble or too much effort to speak up. Academics are exhausted, yet another global phenomenon in neoliberal universities (see Erickson et al., 2020).

Unfortunately, these are the very things academics must fight against if we want to use loan monies for worthwhile projects with long-term positive impact. Systemic change in our universities is necessary to produce project activities such as this case study *systematically* rather than *serendipitously*.

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