

# INTERNATIONAL TRENDS IN UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AND INSTITUTION BUILDING A SRI LANKAN CASE

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This presentation seeks to analyze some of the major contemporary trends in higher education in the western world and the SAARC region and to make a brief submission on the experience of Sri Lanka in institution building for University Education.

The term higher education in this presentation refers to all tertiary level institutions beyond higher secondary level and mainly University Education.

## **International Trends**

Before embarking on analysis of higher education in the SAARC region it is pertinent to say a few words about the international trends in higher education.

By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, higher education systems continued towards internal diversification, regionalization, and Vocationalisation. The end of the last century has also witnessed the continuation of important social, cultural, economic and political development which made impact on

higher education. Prominent among them are the globalization of the economy, the decline of the welfare state, and the commodification of knowledge (Danie Schugurensky 1999). As a result of these new factors there emerged some new trends in University education which emphasized value for money, accountability, planning, cost effectiveness, good management, resource allocation, unit costs, performance indicators and selectivity (Danie Schugurensky 1999).

## **Qualitative and quantitative changes**

In recent times the qualitative and quantitative changes of the student body and the intensification of ties with the industry are the two major traits in respect of higher education in the industrially developed nations. Most of these countries have already entered the phase of universal higher education which refers to an enrolment ratio of more than 50 percent among the higher education age groups (between 18 - 23).

In addition, the population enrolled in the University has become increasingly heterogeneous in terms of age, prior qualifications, of previous studies and of expectations vis - a - vis the university. As a result of these new developments Universities in the west are becoming multi - functional beyond their teaching and research.

### Universalization

Another trend witnessed by the University systems of the industrialized nations has been transformation of elite University to mass University. Trow in his discussion on recent trends in University education considers that higher education becomes a mass phenomenon when the rate of enrolment is above 15 percent and Universal when it exceeds 50 per cent. The United states, indeed has reached the Universal University phase. The University is no longer an instrument of social reproduction as in the past, but a kind of filter for future professional carrier.

### Tackling Massification

The problem of deterioration of the student teacher ratio as a result of massification of the University system was tackled in various ways.

In Sweden and the United Kindom a new category of instructors trained exclusively for teaching and not being required to do research has been recruited.

**Table I**  
**Comparative Enrollments in Higher Education (in%)**

	U.S.A.	Germany	France	U.K
A	38	33	29	20
B	22	07	18	12
C	23	11	10	10

- A. Percentage of the normal pool of young people of the appropriate age for enrolment in higher education who are enrolled in higher education institutions.
- B Net rates of enrolment in Universities (for groups aged 18 - 21 years) in 1991.
- C Percentage of the population aged 25 to 64 years, having been enrolled in a University in 1992.

In many countries part time teachers have been massively engaged.

### Inflation of Courses:

In the Western world in some scientific disciplines the explosion of knowledge rated by research activities

has caused an inflation in the context of course programmes. The quantity of knowledge that needs to be transmitted increases and becomes increasingly specialized at the upper level of higher education. Another trend in the western world is that, the diversification of the demand for higher education has given rise to the appearance of a large number of vocational programmes. As a consequence, the university is no longer the only institution in the market of higher education as it was in the past. In this context, research activities of the Universities will play the role of separator in relation to other institutions of higher education.

### **Links with Economy**

In recent times western Universities are fast establishing close links with the economy at two levels - as a supplier of qualified workers including researchers and as a producer of scientific knowledge. University degrees have become one of the initial requirements upon which one's professional career will be built. The increasing demand for highly qualified workers on the part of private research laboratories and the high technology industries has resulted in the expansion of full opportunities for

the graduates of the tertiary cycle. In the meantime the University system is expected to train two categories of researchers.

-One oriented towards applied research or technological development in industry,

- And the other oriented towards fundamental research. its members having the intention of pursuing an academic career.

Higher education institutions are expected to work in active partnership with parents, schools, students, socio - economic groups and communities.

### **Participation of Woman**

Efforts are being made to eliminate all sexual stereotyping in higher education to consider gender aspects in different disciplines in which they are under - represented Quality in higher education is now considered as a multidimensional concept, which should embrace all its functions, and activities :- teaching and academic programmes, research and scholarship, staffing, Students, buildings, facilities, equipment and services to the academic environment.

## **Information Technology**

The rapid break through in the new information and communication technologies are changing the way knowledge is developed, acquired and delivered; new technologies; offer opportunities to innovate, on course content and teaching methods and to widen access to higher learning. Higher educational institutions are expected in the west to give a lead in drawing on the advantages and potentials of new information and communication technologies.

Higher education in the developed world endeavours to adopt, forward looking management practices that respond to needs of their environments. The ultimate goal of management today is enhancing the institutional mission by ensuring high quality teaching, training and research.

## **Change in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

While identifying some of the major trends and practices in higher education it is relevant and useful to answer the question, what major changes are expected in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in the field of education and the learning process.

It could be safely suggested that life long learning is the first major change. The idea is to introduce a system by which, education, that continues

throughout one's life may alternate with intervals of professional work or other activities. proposals have been formulated in regard to a new definition of the working week, the guaranteed minimal working time and time credits for education by including new activities, into one's own life, by:

- the development of postgraduate courses
- non - formal and informal learning
- distance education etc.

The second major change is the emergence of computer in education in the new century, an essential intellectual tool and it stands at the core of the universal civilization of today. Now we have access to all the books, all the knowledge, all the experts, all the museums and all the scenery in the world.

The third change lies in the international character of this new way of learning. A shift has already taken place from the closed school institutions to networks of cooperating units. Such networks will confirm the to wards an international character.

## **Higher education in the SAARC region : Some Trends**

During the last five decades, mainly after independence, there has been a remarkable expansion in opportunities for higher education in most of the

SAARC countries. This expansion and proliferation of colleges throughout the country have not increased the higher education enrolment rates to a significant level. Whereas the countries of Southeast Asia (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand) enjoy a 10 Percent enrolment rate at higher education level almost all Countries of the SAARC region are having low enrolment rates :- India 5%, Bangladesh 4%, Sri Lanka 6%. These figures cover those enrolled in all types of post secondary education. As far as the enrolment rate of the relevant higher education age group and access to higher education in the South Asian countries are concerned, the performance could not meet the social demand for higher education on the one hand and in countries like Sri Lanka, access to higher education is highly limited. (only about 12, 500 out of 170, 000 University entrants are actually admitted to the university System annually).

A word about Indian higher education : India's higher education system a legacy of the colonial period, has grown into the second largest in the world in the last half century, providing many people with access to education. It has also developed a small number of excellent centers of learning. The standards of these South Asian centers

proved this by the fact that "the medium" in the late 1970 s of Indians and Pakistanis(Living in the U.S.A) were \$ 26,000 and \$ 20,000 respectively well above the U.S. national average of \$ 17,000. The annual aggregate income of Indians in the USA in 1993 was estimated to be over \$ 3 billion (Dept. of Education 1999).

In spite of some what limited development in terms of access, the South Asian Higher education has also produced a very large number of poor quality products from the academic slums as observed by Jayaram (Jayaram 1997). In addition, a large number of University graduates remain unemployed because higher education has expanded much more rapidly than the economy which is incapable of absorbing highly educated youth. Recent reforms pertaining to Indian higher education is in Keeping with the global trends. To mention a few attempts to reduce government control, grant autonomy to colleges, create resources, and develop a new general degree programme for the mass of students are some of them.

### **Sri Lankan Higher Education - some comments**

Sri Lanka has a low level of enrolment in tertiary and university

education ; cross country comparisons also demonstrate Sri Lanka's relatively low performance in several non traditional education indicators. in comparison with India. (See table below).

**Table 11**  
**Enrolment rate in Higher Education in selected Countries.**

Country	Gross Enroll ratio in Tertiary (a) %	Enrolment Higher Education (Leading to degree) (As% of total Enrolment)
Sri Lanka	06	66
India	06	88
Egypt	17	83
Philippines	26	79
Thailand	19	77
Malaysia	9.6	44
Bangladesh	4	NA

(a) Includes all post secondary education leading to a Degree / Diploma/ Certificate

Source : UNESCO World Development Report, 1997 ADB Report

Note : In Sri Lanka only 66 of those enrolled in tertiary education are preparing for the first degree; this percentage is high for countries like India, Egypt etc.

One of the major deficiencies of the system is that it is not responsive to the needs of the society in that access is limited to only a small fraction (2-3 percent of the age cohort and 20% eligible for University admission) of students demanding and willing to finance a University education (see Table below and Figur:1)

**Table 111**  
**Sri Lanka - Qualified and Admitted persons Universities 1993/94 -1995/96**

1993/1994			1994/1995			1995/1996		
No Eligible	No Admitted	%	No Eligible	No Admitted	%	No Eligible	No Admitted	%
55,144 F(31,869)	8,015 F(3,470)	14.5 10.8	59,292 F(34,118)	8,663 F(3,989)	14.6 11.6	56,703 F(33,010)	9,190 F(4,211)	16.2 12.7

Source : UGC Statistical table for 1993/1994 to 1995/1996

As a result of this restricted policy of admission, there has been a unregulated opening of private tertiary education institutes.

In spite of very low output of graduates as a result of this restricted admission policy, substantial unemployment and under employment among University graduates prevails. In all Universities (13th in 2000) in Sri Lanka government has maintained a tight, centrally administered admission policy. Sri Lanka's attempts to establish an affiliated college system as found in

India has failed mainly due to the long standing practice of entering the Universities directly from schools. Strong opposition from the student population has prevented any reforms aiming at expanding access through the establishment of affiliated colleges. The policy of restricted admission to Universities was somewhat relaxed in the mid 1990s when the government responded to increasing demands for wider access to University education by creating three new Universities outside the western province where most of the Universities were (4 out of 9 national Universities) located (See Map - 01). Institution building attempts of the government were limited to the establishment of additional Universities including an Open University.

At the University level the annual entry quota was raised to 12,000 students, or 2 percent of the relevant age cohort. It is very low compared with international standards (see Figure below). Yet the Universities can actually accommodate more intake as their utilization rate of resources ranges only from 50 - 80 percent (Development Forum Paris 2000).

## Non - University Higher Education

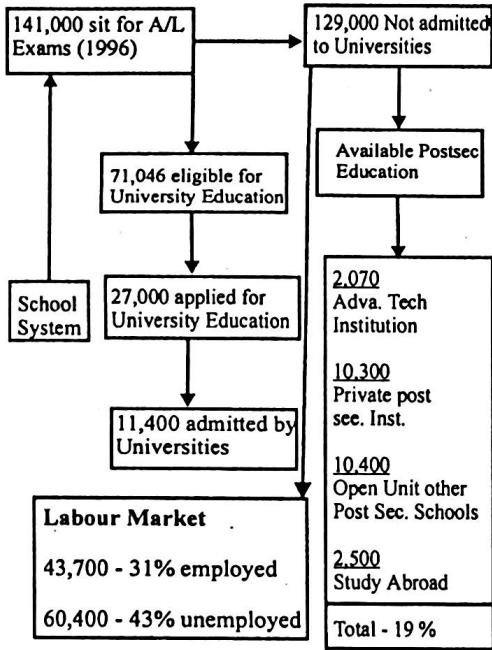
Over the years however, this restricted access to University admission, in the context of expanding demand and changing skills need, has resulted in a large scale expansion of post - secondary vocational education and technical education; for example:

- Public institute (Teacher Training & Social work) - 3,000 full time students
- Advanced Public Technical Institute - 4,200 full time students + Part time students.
- Private and nonprofit Post secondary Professional institutes - 23,000 students
- Profit making private institutions - 7,000 Students
- Open University - 17,000 Students
- No. registered for external degrees } - 89,000 Students

Today there are 500 vocational/ technical institutions, all offering free education and operating without cross-recognition of diplomas (World Bank, 1998). These non university tertiary level institutions are helping to absorb the aspirants for higher education who could not enter the highly restricted university system.

**Figure 1**

**Situation Analysis of G C E (A/L) Holders - via - a - vis Labour Market and further Education (Figure Rounded)**



**Summary**

- 1. Employed - 31 %
  - 2. Unemployed - 43%
  - 3. Other Post Sec. Edu. Ins } 19%
  - 4. University Admission } 07%
- Total: 141,000 = 100%

Source : ADB Documents 2000

**Private Sector Participation**

Due to the continued and Strong role of the state, private sector participation in education has been very limited over the years. An attempt was made to relax the restriction on private sector participation in institution building at tertiary level in the mid 1980s through several amendments to the University Act of 1978. Since then, privatization of higher education has become a politically charged issue in Sri Lanka, and no private Universities conferring local degrees yet exist. One or two private Universities were either absorbed into the state University System (The private Medical College, Ragama) or allowed to disappear (North province Medical College,) Currently the country has a few foreign - affiliated private degree awarding institutions, all conferring only foreign degrees to its graduates. In spite of the fairly high tuition fees, enrolment in these institutions are growing and it appears that those who can afford to pay and are aspiring to obtain a degree are looking forward to the opportunities provided by the private higher educational institutions with the periodical closure of Universities due to internal political strife (1989- 90), alleged poor quality of



education provided by the state University System and attraction towards obtaining a foreign degree have increased the willingness to pay for higher education by middle classes despite their eligibility to seek free access.

As mentioned earlier, institutional development by the private sector was made possible in respect of tertiary level vocational and technical education. The number of such institutions increased from 850 in 1975 to 3,785 in 1984. Currently there are at least 1,000 private institutions registered with the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC).

In fact two state bodies, the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) and the Vocational Training Authority (VTA), were established to monitor the progress of non - university post secondary education in Sri Lanka.

### Major Issues

Some of the major issues confronted by the University system are summarized below:

1. A key factor has been the absence of a consistent national planning framework and overall policy strategy;

2. The public sector continues to monopolize the University system through a regulatory framework;
3. Since the university system rejects almost 85% of those qualified to enter the system, there has been an unregulated opening of private tertiary institutions;
4. Importantly, the university sector suffers from poor quality and outdated programmes, and limited diversified courses, which have little relevance to labour market demands (Presidential Task Force, 1998).
5. The absorption of school final leavers (G C E A/L qualified) and graduates into the labour market is uneven and is declining. (See figure 1 - Accordingly only 43% of them are absorbed).
6. As far as private tertiary educational institutions are concerned there has been an unregulated opening of them.
7. There is a demand for diversified courses/ curricula of international quality standard, and relevance to labour market needs.

8. In the past, university courses prepared students for entry to the government employment it's around 15% and continues to dwindle.
9. The private sector has difficulties in employing young graduates, due to their low English proficiency, inadequate practical exposure and negative attitude to work. Private sector gives importance to attributes such as:

- ability to communicate effectively, including English;
- good interpersonal skills;
- ability to lead a team;
- initiative to take risks;
- ability to organize time;
- Computer literacy;
- Personal grooming and business etiquette (Chamber of Commerce, 1999)

As a result, substantial unemployment and under employment among university graduates prevail.

- 10 University education has been unresponsive to the needs of the labour market needs primarily due to:
- a lack of student choice in the selection of courses;

- overspecialization which prevents the institutions from responding to shifts in the economy;
- Curricula and courses are outmoded and have not kept pace with advances and changes taking place in the academic world elsewhere;
- The extreme rigidity of subjects and subject combinations, themselves loaded with content, irrelevant to the modern and future context;

11. Most of these problems, according to a World Bank study, stem from the public sector monopoly over educational opportunity as well as a centralized control over admissions and budgetary allocation;

### **Recent University Reforms in Sri Lanka - A summary of curricular Reforms**

The modular system that has been recommended under the University Reforms allow for cross discipline and cross - faculty combinations of modules. The changing job structure and the need for continuing education require universities to get prepared with short course based on, most conveniently, the modular system. According to

Siriwardena modular courses broaden scope of training and provide choice. In Sri Lanka the ongoing University Reforms include diversification of courses/curricula. The objectives are to introduce modular programmes, unit and semester systems, expand subject options and to introduce new assessment methods. Provisions of opportunities for students to choose subjects from different faculties will have varieties of options to work towards their degree programme with much more flexibility and wider scope.

### **Linkage with Private Sector**

The reforms envisage direct involvement of public and private sector experts in academic bodies and research. Tertiary education sector in Sri Lanka has weak links with industries and employees. In general industries report difficulty in recruiting job applicants with adequate skills, especially in the specific job they apply for, and lack of capability, in English and proper work attitudes. Most of the managers of industries were of the opinion that the present education system system has failed to fill these deficiencies. About 80 percent said they preferred graduates from the private sector institutions and only 3% showed any preference for state university graduates.

In this respect the area of concern for reform makers are University - employer Links and the objectives for implementation are:

- Redirect courses to labour markets;
- outreach programmes, include employers / trade associations in university bodies; and academic staff in industrial bodies and foreign projects (See Development Forum 2000)

### **Examination Reforms**

The emphasis on end of year examinations and end of degree courses examination will be removed. Course assessments, credit for project work and in - plant training will be given more prominence. Flexibility in the examination system would allow students who wish to take time off to work, perhaps to support themselves, to do so (Economic Review Nov/Dec 1999, p14).

### **New courses**

Some of our new universities are now introducing what can be called non - traditional courses related directly to economic development and catering to emerging area of employment. Sri Lanka must also advance in the field of biochemistry, molecular biology,

recombinant technology, microbiology, fermentation technology, immunology, and bioinformatics. Eco - tourism is an area which has greater economic potential. There is also tremendous scope for the development of new courses in the field such as telecommunication technology and Satellite Imagery. Other priority programmes include :

- English language teaching;
- Aquamarine Sciences;
- Nursing, Pharmacy & Paramedical

Some of the new courses introduced by various universities

Course	University
1. Nursing	Eastern University
2. Management/Accounting/ Business Studies	Colombo, Kelaniya, Sri jayawardanapura EUSL, SEUSL, Rajarata
3. Library Information science	Kelaniya
4. Preschool Education	Open University, EUSL
5. Journalism	Open University
6. Nuclear Science, Plant Pathology, weed Science, (MSc courses)	Colombo
7. Plantation Management, Horticulture, Hospitality Management	Rajarata*
8. Lives stock Production, Export Agriculture	Sabaragamuwa*, Moratuwa
9. Management of technology	Moratuwa
10. Microbiology	Kelaniya
11. Fisheries Biology	Ruhuna

\*New Universities

**Source :** UGCD Documents

## Quality Improvement : Staff Training

It has been decided that each University will establish a Staff Training Unit. For more than half a century it was taken for granted in Sri Lanka that graduates with first or second class are already empowered to tackle any class room teaching situation and lecturing. Some universities have already done so and other universities are in the process of this specific institution building. According to the Paris Development Forum 2000 a package of reforms are needed to upgrade the knowledge and skills of academic Staff in English, Computer Literacy, teaching presentation skills, assessment activities, and general academic performance (Development Forum Paris, P-13)

## Institution Building

All state universities together with UGC will be undertaking Some Steps to institution building including:

- Institutional structure to ensure division of responsibilities and authorities for collective team management;
- Improvement of decision making process structure;

- Improvement of systems including Management Information systems;
- Management development to strengthen leadership; improve management functions and planning;
- Strengthen organizational functions such as curriculum designing, teaching methodologies, research activities, and staff development (Development forum, 2000, p.22).

### **Conclusion**

One of the most striking features of the University Reform is that it is in keeping with the unprecedented changes taking place in a wide variety of nations having different social, political, historical, and economic characteristics Sri Lanka which runs short of investment capital has to depend on inflow of foreign capital and foreign oriented private sector. With the large scale establishment of private sectors which

offers 85% of the employment opportunities and the decline of state employment sector, it has become inevitable to think of new and non traditional avenues to supply the necessary manpower to attract foreign investment. As the private sector, is now officially recognized as the engine of growth, it has become a necessity to look into the supply of highly trained manpower, trained by the university system. Any policy initiatives taken by governments throughout the world show that the direction of the change follows an unmissable similar path and Sri Lanka is no exception to this rule. Restructuring of University education and new reforms aiming at institution building to tackle the issues posed by globalization of the economy in Sri Lanka reflect the increasing power of international and domestic political and economic forces in influencing University education policy.

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