

Public Universities: Present status and the Way forward

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Abstract

Sri Lankan Universities have come a long way since the establishment of the University of Ceylon in 1942. Starting from a single university with a few hundred students and a double digit number of faculty members, the public university system of Sri Lanka today boasts of having 15 universities and 7 postgraduate institutes catering to over a hundred thousand students and producing nearly 30 thousand bachelor's degrees and nearly 9000 postgraduates annually. A recent study by a Mathematics special degree student revealed that a cost of a medical graduate at the University of Sri Jayewardenepura in 2013 was more than 4 million LKR per year. With the subsequent increases in salaries and capital expenditure etc, this cost must have gone beyond 5 million per student per year by now. Anybody who looks at statistical data and the UGC annual handbook that is readily available in the web can see the enormous government expenditure incurred by the public university system.

After almost 75 years since the establishment of the University of Ceylon, where do we stand today? With my experience working in the Sri Lankan university system for four decades, I see potential improvements that can be made. Libraries have massive volumes of books and also allow students to even borrow laptops! Students have easy access to computers and also the internet. Having these two facilities suggests that if we gear our students in the proper direction with independent learning skills, the country should essentially gain the return from the investment in higher education. Then this island paradise with fertile lands, ample natural resources together with the high-potential human resources, could be doing very well. However, what is visible is quite the contrary. Academics and non-academics continue to demand higher salaries and benefits, but is there sufficient focus on whether the knowledge and graduates produced by our public universities benefit Sri Lanka? Even though it doesn't represent the majority of the university students, the inter university student union, the only visible student body is holding on to their slogan of "protect free education", while medical students are protesting against the SAITM. Though the first well-known ragging victim Rupa Rathnaseeli entered the university before me, we were fortunate not to see inhuman ragging during our student days. However, what we hear over and over again now with regard to that menace is heart-breaking. Statistics available for university graduate unemployment rate is also not very encouraging. However, the chairman of the UGC declared recently that the government increased the annual intake to the universities by 10% this year and they hope to continue the practice in the coming years as well. The number of postgraduate courses too have been increased due to a call by the Asian Development Bank. These increases without accompanying improvements to the quality of faculty or a proper functioning qualifications framework and a quality assurance systems is a serious problem.

After 75 years of university education, we should be concentrating on producing quality postgraduates. However, hundreds of taught Masters degree programs are officially fulltime satisfying the number of contact hours requirement but in fact part-time as students attend 8-10 hours of lectures on one day in the weekend against all accepted norms of conducting courses. Masters candidates of these taught programs take care of their research work also similarly on part-time basis and it is a myth to produce high quality research in such an environment. After awhile, since the supervisor needs the credit for supervision and the student needs the credential, the degree is awarded. Some of the research leading to Ph. D and M. Phil degrees are done utilizing millions worth grants from the University or from the NSF. However, the quality of research and the impact of the publication resulting from it is very poor in most instances. Academics who hold senior administrative positions should be more proactive guiding higher education policy in the country.

I hope to further identify the strengths and weaknesses I have witnessed in my four-decade long career with the single objective of discussing a way forward.