

*This is a modified version of the paper presented at the Ecumenical Institute for Study and Dialogue, Colombo.*

## UNIVERSITY EDUCATION AFTER FIFTY YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE

Ashley Halpe

### The Current Situation

**C**urrent thinking on Higher Education in Sri Lanka makes great play with the notion of employability (with the unemployability of most of our graduates being seen almost as a corollary). Correspondingly, Advanced Level students strain every nerve to gain admission to Medicine, Engineering, Law and Commerce streams in the universities. On either hand, the regard is to use and function; the aims are training and certification. The student is a marketable product and even sees himself primarily as a marketable product. There is no concern with the nurture and the realization of the whole human person.

Even my own subject, English, is taught primarily for "specific Purposes": the purposes or needs of housemaids or hoteliers, bankmen and bureaucrats, law students and lecturers. Its status as the real international medium of our time is only seen in terms of flying faxes, instructional manuals and TOEFL scores. There is little engagement with the excitements of commanding an enormously flexible and copious medium or of tapping into a huge reservoir of encoded life-experience and life-enrichment. We deny this to our people, perhaps, in a daydream of sentimental monlingualism. We fail to see that all the vast array of writers, playwrights, film directors and other artists who led our cultural renaissance were formidably bilingual, even multilingual. Martin Wickramasinghe, E.R. Sarachchandra, Siri Gunasinghe, Amaradeva, Chitrasena, Henry Jayasena, Vasantha Obeyesekere, Dharmasena Pathiraja et. al - are patently familiar with the thought and culture of the world. They are utterly literate and fluent in English.

We used to ask, are you a man or a mouse? Today's question could be; are you a man or a mouse-pusher? Our university's head of Computer Science has spoken of the fashion driving hundreds to "computer classes" as a mindless craze. I do not hesitate to characterize the enormous increase of AL registration in the so called commerce stream as equally driven by a mindless (or should we say hapless?) desire to become useful, usable objects. In both cases the conviction is that, that way lies the pot of gold, in total unawareness of the near-unanimous opinion of private sector employers that such graduates in particular are virtually unemployable.

### Functionalist Education

**I**sn't Sri Lankan education as a whole driven by a functionalist philosophy? Take university courses of study. Isn't it assumed that Medical, Engineering, Agricultural and Veterinary courses are adequate, even excellent, if they pass on task-oriented knowledge and skills (usually miscalled 'professional')? There is no concern for what we call life skills and psychic competence; both in relation to the individual himself and in relation to the people, the circumstances and the environments, on whom and on which, those skills would be practised.

Even in Faculties of Arts isn't there an increasing tendency to compartmentalize and specialize? Do departments of Economics call on the services of professors of Philosophy and Modern Fiction, both disciplines highly relevant to their students? Do students of Sinhala take courses, so important and even necessary for the contextualisation of their reading, offered by departments of History, Modern Languages or Western Classics?

Nearly 30 years ago the Faculty of Arts in Peradeniya took the highly innovative step of slicing it's GAQ (1st year) curriculum in half to add on a foundation course. One part of this was Elementary English. Another had to be either basic Mathematics or Logic and Scientific Method. And the third consisted of general studies, including introduction to Darwinian theory, cloud physics, the appreciation of the arts, the major religions, the great philosophers, and so on.

The degeneration here is pitiful. The faculty abandoned the general studies programme. The Maths programme has been taught by untrained assistant lecturers from the Science Faculty whose brief appeared to be to take students through the O' Level syllabus in Maths, more or less. Logic and Scientific Method is only taken by students with a rooted aversion to Maths. It is only the English Language Teaching Unit that has consistently and courageously attempted creative responses to changing circumstances.

What do we do about the patently disastrous AL system? It tortures students with the meaningless acquisition of information and places a premium on mark-earning ability, competitiveness and sheer survivalism. It sends us Science students with 300 Advanced Level

aggregates who fail their Medical and Engineering exams in droves. It sends us examination athletes in Arts who are totally incapable of reading, let alone digesting, recent contributions to knowledge in their own disciplines. And what do we do? We spoon-feed them, we fail them, we herd them into slums and we permit their immediate senior to torture them. We certainly don't make any effort to re-educate them, to give them the exhilaration of discovering knowledge, experience and their own capabilities—as what? As students? No; our children, our heirs, and indeed, our justification before God and Man.

## Multiple Crisis

**I**t has to be granted that some of the trouble stems from the necessary but forced expansion of a hitherto sclerotic and unaccommodative system in terms of the aim, quite simply stated by the University Grants Commission “by 1993 we should be enrolling all those who want to enter university.” This has led to structural crises; but more importantly, it has led to academic and moral crises.

The academic crisis is immediately evident when we look at student academic performance. In the two major “professional” disciplines, for example, Engineering and Medicine, 40% of the candidates seem regularly to fail the first examination at the first attempt. A recent final examination of one such faculty yielded only 50% of passes which included only 19% of classes. An examination in another faculty resulted in a 70% failure rate. It might be noted here that in one of these faculties, study revealed that 40% of the students evinced symptoms of stress at various levels, in many cases related to learning problems, while a substantial number of students from the disciplines of Engineering and Medicine were active in student unrest during the last ten years. It is now common knowledge that in Peradeniya the leadership came from students of these faculties.

Let us place against such evidence the popular mythology of university admission—(i) that the “best” students of any one vintage gravitate towards Engineering and Medical studies after winning their O'levels; (ii) that only the best among these best gain admission to medical and engineering faculties. The selection of Junior Executives where the minimum requirement was a Lower Second, the performance of the 1200 candidates in tests of general knowledge and intelligence was very poor. This corresponds with the experience of colleagues and myself on selection boards that many graduates, often with classes, are innocent of acquaintance with important works in their own field—this was true even of some candidates shortlisted for an international postgraduate award.

These indications are related to the students' very poor command of English, the language of most of the books available to them. Special students in Arts take a compulsory paper in English at the end of their second year, after two years of English preceded by an intensive course. The great majority of candidates fail to score 50% on this paper.

If students read so little how could 155 of them win classes?

In yet another faculty, students who had done a month's work on their subjects after completing the Intensive Course in English were asked by a counsellor whether the English they had learnt was now of some use to them. Their answer was “It's of no use.”

It is interesting to note in this connection that the report of the National Commission on Youth Unrest has this comment:

The student does not appear to take the initiative to consult the books and materials that are actually available. As a result the system of note learning and copied assignments continues into the University.

## Poor Academic Production

**O**ne turns to the record of the dons for a restoration of collective self-respect. It is a proud record. In the five years from 1982 to 1986 the staff of a single faculty published 50 books and 572 scholarly articles—a record that is matched by the other faculties of the same and other universities. Paper presenters were on invitation as recognized scholars in their fields. The long history of international university joint programmes - e.g. of Peradeniya's Chemistry Department with Uppsala, of Agriculture with Texas, Oxford, etc, of Sri Jayawardenapura in Management Studies, and Medicine with Connecticut, is another indicator of the standing of our academics.

Yet there is a flip side. A spot check by one of my colleagues, not long ago, revealed that there were extremely few publications by academics under thirty-five years of age, while younger academics are also significantly under-represented among presenters at learned gatherings.

Add to this the effect of the brain drain and the situation begins to look quite disturbing. The Youth Commissioners noted that quite a few departments are 50% understaffed and some as much as 70%.

One reason is the extreme paucity of institutional and national support for research. Research funding is laughable: the University of Peradeniya gets only a couple of million rupees for research and Rs. 500,000 for publications, which includes the publication of several university journals. It's just as well that Lankan academics and departments of some standing attract research funding from abroad.

## Crisis of Values

**W**hen the structural and academic crises are viewed in relation to each other, the third and most serious crisis, the crisis of values, presses on our attention. The inability of the university system to deliver better student performance is clearly symptomatic of pedagogic insensitivity and lack of will, casting long shadows back over the cautious approach to the expansion project. However, it is also the case that long experience of state interference with university structures and of disruption, along with the general public's lack of concern have tended to make academics

more oriented towards the predictable processes, relating to well-defined and laudable academic goals of research and publication; more concerned with personal achievements than with the teaching function.

Still, whatever the practical exigencies and student inadequacies that militate against better performance, it is surely the business of educators to seek to ensure an acceptable quality of intellectual life in the undergraduate. The complete quotation from the Youth Commission's report reads:

The Student does not appear to take the initiative to consult the books and materials that are actually available. As a result the system of note learning and copied assignment reports continues into the University. This prevents feedback and critical enquiry which many feel are the basis of University learning.

"The basis of University learning!" And "many" would also feel that the impression of the Commissioners is accurate. If this is really the basis it is surely the responsibility of the educators to set up the learning situations and evaluation procedures which would elicit "feedback" and compel "critical enquiry." A "system of rote learning and copied assignment reports" could hardly survive if students were compelled to learn by processes such as problem solving, logical deduction and comparative analysis. If the student "does not appear to consult the books and materials that are actually available," it is surely the task of the teachers to demand that they do and to check that they have, of professional educators to be professional.

But, of course, these curricular and pedagogic issues are only one aspect of the present problematization of values in our universities. We can hardly forget that we have recently been made forcefully aware of student frustration, *kekuma* at social inequality, and politically directed violence, while the continued incidence of sadistic ragging and such manifestations as cultural puritanism on one of the campuses also point to deep-seated socio-moral insecurity. I cannot imagine how students who witnessed the torture of three men at Jayatilaka Hall on 8th June 1989 or the similar violence at Sri Jayawardhanapura shortly after or the torture, miscalled "ragging", that led to the death of S. Varapragash, let alone those who participated in these actions, can live with their memories and consciences. On the other hand, we have to remember that 300 students are still missing after the crackdown on insurrectionary activities in 1989/90.

### Disorientation of the Young

We are deeply conscious today of the socio-economic causes of youth unrest since the mid sixties--of the national dimensions of the issues and predicaments involved. But, perhaps, we should wonder why university education and university life seem to do little to moderate the radical disorientation of the young men and women who enter our universities today.

Rather, they seem to contribute to it.

This seems to have been the experience of sensitive observers even in the early years of the university. Thus the protagonist of the first novel of Lankan university life, Siri Gunasinghe's *Hevanaella* is an undergraduate from a rural background who undergoes tortures of psychic disturbance, while his younger contemporary, the undergraduate of Gunadasa Amarasekera's *Apasu Gamana* exclaims "I cursed myself and my miserable education!" Twenty years later an undergraduate writes of :

Sick days  
With arguments politely  
Kicking my teeth out

and more recently a fresher writes :

That's all we feel  
Sick of being  
Brilliant, and intellectual  
Part of an unreal world...

In *Hetaa Eccere Kaluwara Nae/Curfew and Full Moon* Professor Sarchchandra paints the undergraduates as angry, hurt, combatively doctrinaire when they are not brashly optimistic and certainly not imbued with a love of the institution; both he and Professor Suraweera in another well-known novel *Atta Bindeyi, Paya Burulen* seem to perceive the university as spiritually diseased.

Ediriweera Sarchchandra, A.V. Suraweera, Siri Gunasinghe and Gunadasa Amarasekera are hardly witnesses to be taken lightly; three of them are as distinguished as academics as they are as creative writers. The voices of the undergraduate writers bear same witness though in their own way. There may be brilliance and academic splendor but there would seem to be something murky and disturbing in the university's soul.

### Re-Fashioning the Elite

But at the same time we have to recognize the academic daring as well as the absolute social necessity of the current expansion and diversification of tertiary education. Its social agenda is the reformation, of even the reformulation, of the Lankan elite. What is in process in the project of enrolling "all those who want to enter the University" is the replacement of a divided population, 20% becoming cadets of a supposed elite and 80% remaining a frustrated constituency, with a youth population democratized upwards, as a it were, by tertiary education.

This massive extension of higher education and the refashioning of the elite that it implies is already very much under way. Hence the nature and quality of that education, and of the university experience at its centre, become concerns of major importance. Given the considerable complexity of the system already in existence, and the much greater complexity of the system that is being developed, it would seem to be particularly important to have at the core a philosophy of higher education that would give coherence and perspective to the increasing diversity.

This is even more important when we remember that diversity is largely in the vocational area, providing an array of courses designed to improve the employability of educated youth. Einstein once opposed "the idea that the school has to teach directly that special knowledge and those accomplishments which one has to use later directly in life 'because' the demands of life are much too manifold". Perhaps, we needn't go so far; merely insist that tertiary education should not consist entirely of "specialized knowledge," but should also include training and experience in life skills and that general culture which would enhance the students' ability to deal with the "manifold demands of life".

New initiatives are urgent, the close reexamination of current structures and methods essential. We can but hope that such measures will lead to an attitudinal change. We can derive some comfort from the reminder by a senior historian that 'the fiftieth year in the life of a university is merely "the end of the foundation years" and that "it would take many decades more before one is entitled to talk of its maturity".

Say not the struggle naught the labour and the wounds are vain. We might still be able to rediscover the simple wisdom of what Sir Ivor Jennings said in his *Student's Guide to University Education in Ceylon*:

... university education is many-sided. It is indeed designed to produce not good examinees but broadly-educated men and women.

## The Age of the Tuition-Master

**B**ut as things stand today one sees the convergence of the pedagogical, structural and moral crises in a malaise that I would call the Triumph of the Tuition Masters.

What does the "tuition master" do ?

He aims entirely at examination results. He guesses the probable questions for the year's AL, GAQ (External), BA (External) examinations or whatever and coaches students to answer them. If he aspires to do more, it is only to dictate notes which his students memorize and regurgitate at exams.

He has won. I do not think a single student who enters the universities does so entirely on the work done in conventional school classes: More importantly, university teaching itself has capitulated to the mindset of students moulded by the tuition masters. It has degenerated into the dictation of notes, the acceptance of note-learning and of the failure of students to read, and the narrow pursuit of examination success. The transfer of intellectual skills, and the stimulation of the spirit of free enquiry, intelligent skepticism and sensitive self-development are not the perceptible active principles of university "education" today.

The final absurdly, in this regard, is the entrenchment of "private" tuition in the university itself. In two ways one is the established popularity of "Kuppi" classes: examination-directed coaching of junior students by seniors, perhaps with the unstated aim of ensuring

support for the political philosophies of those seniors since no fees are charged. The second is the increasing resort of university teachers to private tuition as a means of supplementing their incomes, though "supplementing" is often hardly appropriate when the earnings are sometimes, reputedly, massively greater than the university salaries of these "masters".

An inevitable result is the defeat to the expected democratization of higher education, which could have produced a restructuring of the Lankan elite. Expansion accompanied by such a degeneration of pedagogy, such a failure to develop real academic skills and life skills, can only result in levelling down-not in raising up; can only produce semi-literates armed with degrees who are, hence, unaware of the valuelessness of their qualifications.

A further consequence is that among the supposedly "Educated" (for "educated" read "certificated"), new forms of stratification and privilege have emerged as the more gifted and the wealthy make their own way in the world. They find their way into more satisfying - and more respected-educational systems abroad or enrol in specialized professional courses with reputedly high standards here. The majority cannot do either. They must inevitably burn with envy and resentment as they watch the careers of their more fortunate peers.

When Sir Ivor Jennings sought to summarise the ideas on which the residential-and in those days unitary and autonomous-University of Ceylon was created, he said "the university is a community which one never leaves." Seeking to define its mission, Peradeniya added to the basic tasks of educating students and advancing knowledge the duties of nurturing the student's personality, providing him with a good environment and contributing to national development. (Appendix I) The teachers of the Faculty of Arts had a well-attended seminar at which they developed a Profile of the Desired Undergraduate (Appendix II). And more recently, when students answered a questionnaire on, basically, the profile of the desired teacher, they wanted teachers who were well prepared and effective in the classroom, able to guide students through close relationships with them, able to appreciate the arts, have integrity of character, and be models for students.

The messages converge to project a view of education itself; one not too distant from my stated theme.

They relate to 'Man' as Man and not as tool and object.

And so I conclude by inviting you to ponder the possibilities of a holistic education (for us whole human beings). If we are not actually diseased in mind and body and spirit, if we are healthy minds in healthy bodies with healthy appetites for food, drink, beauty and each other; curious and courageous, compassionate and passionate, surely we should be apostles of an education that nurtures the total human person.

Could we not transform the enormous reservoir of experience available in the country into power, power that can be directed to the dynamic revitalization of Sri Lankan education and particularly our universities?

## Appendix I:

### Mission Statement of the University of Peradeniya

The Mission of the University of Peradeniya is to excellence in higher education and research and to contribute to the national development.

We achieve these by

1. Giving students intellectually rigorous and creative education in their chosen disciplines.
2. Encouraging the total and harmonious development of every student regardless of sex, race, religion, caste or physical disability;
3. Maintaining an environment in which a community of scholars and students can flourish;
4. Supporting creativity in aesthetic activities;
5. Contributing to society in developing moral integrity by education of students to accept social responsibility;
6. Advancing, updating and disseminating knowledge;
7. Advising and collaborating in programmes of national development.

## Appendix II:

### Profile of the desired graduate of the faculty of arts

#### 1. Must have a command of knowledge in the relevant fields and methods of access to it.

The Faculty must be able to provide a substantial quantum of knowledge in the relevant fields. Ideally the knowledge the undergraduate gains should be detailed in his/her own fields but integrative enough to link his knowledge with those of others. Therefore it includes both essential general knowledge and subject-specific knowledge.

#### 2. Must be capable of critical thinking

The graduate should not take knowledge and the worlds as they are but subject both of them to critical scrutiny. The advancement of knowledge, the identification of problems is the outcome of critical thinking. However, critical thinking is also essential to decisions regarding the future advancement of the individual and society.

#### 3. Must have imagination and creativity

This is closely related to critical thinking and complementary to it. Academically significant advances in knowledge require hypotheses - leaps into the unknown. Better management of the known world too, requires imagination and creativity, e.g. in professional and executive position.

#### 4. Must have self-confidence and moral and social awareness

The graduate must be able to lead the society. For this graduate should be confident of him/herself and should have a sound understanding of the society. He should also have moral integrity.

#### 5. Must have aesthetic awareness and concern for the environment

The modern world is a world of communications. The graduate must be able to communicate and be communicated with. This includes a new kind of literacy, i.e. computer skills, presentational skills, group work skills, etc.

#### 6. Must acquire competency in English

A graduate must have access to the wider world of knowledge that is available in English. This necessitates a reasonable command of English. Hence he/she must develop competence in English early in his/her undergraduate programme to participate fully in and contribute to the academic world.

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