

Economics: In Search of Relevance and Excellence in University Teaching in Sri Lanka

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This is an essay on Chapter 4, 'Economics: In Search of Relevance and Excellence in University Teaching, of the book *"Beyond Boundaries: One Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities; Volume II: Social Sciences / Premakumara de Silva. [et al.] University Grants Commission, Government Press, Colombo: 2021, 282 pp. (ISBN 978-624-5980-02-4)"* reviewed as a commentary on the evolution of tertiary-level Economics Education under the umbrella of Social Science Education in Sri Lanka. This essay will provide an in-depth and holistic analysis of the content of Chapter 4, highlighting the interconnectedness of most of the disciplines in the social sciences. The chapter attempts to blend the historical orientation of economics with contemporary historical, philosophical, and political developments by taking the reader back in time through the Evolution of Economics teaching in Sri Lanka from university college days to what it is today. It is not unreasonable to conclude that the socio-political culture of the country, together with a lack of knowledge about basic economics, among other things, have been instrumental in leading Sri Lanka to its present predicament. Therefore, understanding and analysing the evolutionary process of economic education has never been more important for Sri Lanka, especially if the country is determined to avoid repeating the same mistakes in the future.

KEYWORDS: Social Sciences, Sri Lanka, Universities, Economics, Education, Political Science

DISCUSSION

Gary Becker, Nobel Prize winner for Economics in 1992, dedicated his time to researching the economic aspects of various social issues such as education, crime and punishment, and family relations. He introduced the concept of "human capital" in 1964 in his book by the same name, where he views education not as a form of consumption that represents a costly expenditure for government but as an investment that improves the economic

worth of individuals (e.g., human capital) and thereby raises the country's overall productivity and economic competitiveness. Though there has been a continuous effort to strengthen STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) education, specifically over the last two decades, educators all over the world agree that a complementary effort to strengthen humanities and social sciences education is equally important, if not more important (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013). In a world where the physical and mental satisfactions of human beings are directly affected by economic, military, ecological, religious, and technological challenges, the extraordinary promise of being knowledgeable on all fronts of the Humanities and Social Sciences cannot be overemphasised (Mapping the Future, 2013). Faced with the unenviable task of preparing the next generation of citizens to be educated in the broadest possible sense so that they can participate in their own governance and engage efficiently and productively with the rest of the world, it is very timely that the University Grants Commission embarked on this massive task of summarising and analysing the hundred-year history of the evolution of humanities and social science education in Sri Lankan universities.

This review focuses on Chapter 4, 'Economics: In Search of Relevance and Excellence in University Teaching', of '*Beyond Boundaries: One Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities; Volume II: Social Sciences*', as a narrative of the evolution of Economic Education within the Sri Lankan university system. Thoughtfully chosen quotes by Mahatma Gandhi, Judith Butler, and Gunapala Malalasekara in the introductory chapter appropriately set the tone for the rest of the chapters, arousing the curiosity of the reader to find out the way social sciences would essentially connect the three ideologies. Though Volume II covers the disciplines of Social Sciences, the simple description of the difference between the two sets of disciplines the world has come to accept under Humanities and Social Sciences seems appropriate since the introduction covers the Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities as a wholesome evolution. It is especially commendable that the discussion is not only about the achievements but also about the setbacks and the relevance and legitimacy of the questions such as the quality of the graduates, the quality assurance of study programmes, and most importantly, the employability of the graduates with degrees in the Humanities and Social sciences. Concluding the introduction with a self-evaluation about the UGC itself, the policymakers in general, and the academic community not being

serious enough in making a legitimate effort to bring sustainable solutions to improving the Research and Development (R&D) culture and the employability of the graduates in these disciplines could certainly be appreciated as an unbiased self-criticism.

The transition from Geography in Chapter 3 of the book to Economics in Chapter 4 seems to have taken a natural path, showing the interconnectedness of the two disciplines from the early days since human survival depended on “accurate knowledge of places, the probable locations of enemies, edible plants, water, and cave home sites”. The explanation about the change in humans’ geographic perspective due to surplus farm production, where field boundaries, city lines, market centres, and communication routes had to be defined, fits well with the explanation Adam Smith provides in “*An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*” as follows: “As soon as the land of any country has all become private property, the landlords, like all other men, love to reap where they have never sown, and so demand a rent even for its natural produce” (Smith 1976a: 56). Known as the “Queen of Social Sciences,” Economics is the focal discipline of Chapter 4 by renowned Economist Prof. W. D. Lakshman. The importance of Economics, which has become an interdisciplinary subject in many faculties dealing with Social Sciences, is recognised by every human being since we are all practising economists. This chapter tries to blend the historical orientation of economics with contemporary historical, philosophical, and political developments by taking the reader back in time through the evolution of Economics teaching in Sri Lanka from university college days to what it is today.

Though the transformation of Economics taught in English to *svabhāṣā* (people’s own language) in the 1970s was a challenge due to the dearth of teaching material in *svabhāṣā*, the challenge was overcome as a result of the commitment of many Economists who were committed to filling the vacuum. As a result, the number of students who opted for Economics soared, and graduates with degrees in Economics showed greater success in securing better jobs than those who specialised in other disciplines, mainly due to the value placed on the degree programmes in economics by the changing dynamics of the socio-economic and political landscape of the country and around the world as well.

Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines “Economics” as “a social science concerned chiefly with the description and analysis of the production,

distribution, and consumption of goods and services" while Adam Smith (1776) defined it as "An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations". The Online Etymology Dictionary shows that the origin of the word "economy" can be traced back to the Greek word "Oikonomia" which means "Household Management" and therefore "economics" would mean the "knowledge and principles of household management". The economic philosophy of the Hebrews dating back to about 2500 BC did not consider any economic problem without connecting the dots with the existing philosophical, ethical, and political framework at the time. The brief description of the transformation from the colonial era to the beginning of the free education system in the country and the evolution of university-level economic education through a multi-disciplinary framework to a monolithic specialty as we have come to accept it today is an intriguing journey for the reader to have their receptors open for the rest of the chapter. The Author goes on to say that "The interdisciplinarity in Economics teaching at these early stages enabled students to gain a more broad-based knowledge of Economics as a Social Science discipline. In a philosophical sense, the study of Economics internationally has moved away from the perception of it being a Social and Behavioural Science."

Explaining the mismatch between the graduates and the job market in Sri Lanka, the author states that the youth insurrection in 1971 was because the educated youth were against the higher education system of the country as it did not make the youth eligible for worthwhile employment after graduation. Subsequently, specialisation options were motivated by the widely discussed contemporary issue of making the degree more employment oriented. In the process, many subject areas were added to suit market demand. However, the author does not agree with the objective of making graduates able to find remunerative employment soon after graduation, as it has proven to be elusive, even after a series of curriculum reforms extending over several decades. The author is of the view that the issue involved went beyond university curriculum reform and extended into the performance of the overall economy of the country as well as various other factors influencing labour market movements. The appropriateness of such a view was proven by Sri Lankans when they demonstrated their dissatisfaction and disagreement, through the 'Aragalaya' or 'struggle of the people', with the decisions of the rulers of the country that brought the economy of the country down to unprecedented levels by the year 2022.

Systematic analysis of global transformations affecting international markets, international trade and payment systems, relationships between nations, foreign exchange rate regimes, and wars in different regions of the world and their impact on the Sri Lankan economy and economic education under several sub-themes makes it much easier for the reader to grasp the interconnectedness of almost all the disciplines of the social sciences. Economists, in general, agree that using mathematics and statistics as and when needed with the proper intentions is both necessary and helpful. The use of mathematics in this context is seen not only in economics but also in almost all other disciplines, irrespective of their categorization as being in the physical or social sciences. Disciplines coming under the physical sciences usually welcome mathematization with open arms, with the feeling of welcoming a long-lost family member who is back to help them out in a difficult situation. But the concern about the overuse of mathematical theories in economics, sometimes even overriding the inapplicable and unrealistic nature of outcomes, is what created opposition to the mathematization of economics. This overreliance on mathematics may have contributed to economic disasters around the world over the years, including the failure to predict international financial crises in time to make relevant players aware of the imminent dangers. No matter how beautiful the mathematical theories look and how smoothly the models work in a perfect environment defined by the variables included in the model and subject to the assumptions made, there is a very good chance that they will not work in real life since it is impossible to formulate human actions. The narrative of the evolution of the system in general and economic education in particular over the last one hundred years, about half of which is through the author's own intellectual journey from his undergraduate days all the way to becoming a senior professor in Economics and the Vice Chancellor of the University of Colombo, provides a holistic view about not just economics but the progression of social science education within the system of Sri Lankan universities.

DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES

The intimate connection between the two disciplines of Geography and Economics and with Sociology, Social Anthropology, Political Science and Public Policy (Park, 1921) could easily be viewed through this one-hundred-year evolutionary process of Social Sciences in Sri Lankan universities if the reader focuses on Chapters 7 and 8 right after Chapters 3 and 4. Two veterans in the field of Sociology and Anthropology, Professors Kalinga Tudor

Silva and Sasanka Perera, have organised Chapter 7, “Sociology and Anthropology: Evidence-Based Inquiry into the Social World,” into a logical sequence of six themes starting from “Origin and Development” all the way to suggestions for “Way Forward,” covering the contributions made to Sri Lankan society through the education process of the discipline with a brief comparison to that of the Indian system. It is important to note the fact that Sociology, Anthropology, or any of their cognate subjects were not taught in the Sri Lankan university system, University College, at that time, during the first twenty-one years of its existence. The introduction of Sociology to the University of Ceylon as a separate department under the leadership of the American Sociologist Bryce Ryan and offering the subject as a specialisation within the Economics study programme is an interesting turn of events, to say the least. The authors have highlighted this in the introduction as follows: “In any case, it is important to point out that the discipline of Sociology was established in Sri Lanka under the influence of American Sociology rather than British Sociology or Social Anthropology, even though Sri Lanka was a British colony, and the University of Ceylon was established under the leadership of Ivor Jennings, who came from Cambridge University”.

Moving on to Chapter 8, ‘Political Science and Public Policy: Cultivating the Critical Spirit,’ the reader can experience the intimate connection of the discipline with Sociology, Economics, and Geography. Professors Navaratne Bandara and Jayadeva Uyangoda, both veteran political scientists, not only as academics but also as real-life political activists, display the wealth of experience they have had both on and off the academic stage, taking the reader through a fascinating journey in this chapter. It is interesting to notice here again that the British tradition of political economy, which focused on interrelationships between the government and economic policy, was highlighted through political science education. Not only do they mention the 1971 insurgency, ethnic conflict, and internal war during the 1980s but also the politicisation of academic and student communities as well as the university administrations as major factors influencing the intellectual life in all Sri Lankan universities since the early 1970s. Among many other contributions described in the chapter, what stands out the most are the books on all different aspects of the Sri Lankan political landscape by Professor A. J. Wilson, who has also been an advisor to President J. R. Jayewardene in drafting the constitution in 1978. Though the system has produced numerous world-class academics who have significantly contributed to the field of

Political Science education, the chapter opens the possibility for a reader to wonder why the system has not been able to produce a single sensible politician who could have accelerated the development of the country with the knowledge gathered through the programme over all these years. It seems almost natural for the readers of Chapter 4 about the hundred-year history of Sri Lanka's economics education to ask a similar question about the country's economists too.

CONCLUSION

As the concluding remarks of the book mention, "Re-establishing the connection between Social Science and social problems should be a high priority for all of us - social scientists and citizens alike. The importance of this remark, especially about the connection between knowledge of basic economics and social problems, couldn't have been emphasised more than by the celebratory behaviour of the people after hearing the news about the approval of the IMF loan in March 2023. The social problems (deepening poverty, deepening inequalities of wealth, income, and quality of life, violence against individuals and groups, oppression of women and girls, climate change, resource exhaustion, environmental degradation, persistent authoritarian regimes, imperfect democracies, corruption, inadequate systemic response to disaster, etc.) we face are crucially important, they are intractable, and they are often trending in the wrong direction. The solutions for such problems will require the artful design of new institutions and new ways of coordinating social behaviour." It shows that the education system of the country has a greater responsibility in addressing these issues. Education, though it is considered a discipline under the umbrella of Social Sciences, will have to take a lead role in guiding all the disciplines in the right direction, starting from the primary and secondary levels all the way to postgraduate research and knowledge production and raising the level of awareness of society in general.

Renowned economist Prof. W. D. Lakshman, the author of Chapter 4, successfully explores the central role of Economics, considering it a prominent discipline often referred to as the "Queen of Social Sciences". Readers can appreciate the way the evolution of Economics into an interdisciplinary subject due to its relevance to our everyday lives is presented throughout the chapter. However, the author's observation of the influence of the general perception of 'Economics' brought in by the wave of numerous

Faculties of Management and Business Studies across the spectrum of Sri Lankan state universities will certainly entice the inquisitive reader.

The very first goal in the list of seventeen SDGs is 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' by the year 2030. However, with all the difficulties created by COVID-19, even the UN experts are now saying that it is highly unlikely that the world will be able to achieve not only the first one but also the other SDGs by 2030. Though it is understandable that the world would need a bit more time to recover from the economic and psychological shocks brought on by the pandemic, a more important inquiry would be to analyse whether any of these SDGs would have been achieved by 2030 even if there had been no pandemic. Poverty is an issue the UN and other forums have been addressing through all types of different formats, such as reduction, alleviation, or eradication, long before the current SDGs came into being, though without much success. The first report, Implementation of the First UN's Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (1997–2006), was tabled at the sixty-second General Assembly in 2007, and the report about the second decade discussed the activities through the period from 2008 to 2017. A similar proposal was tabled at the seventy-third General Assembly in 2018, showcasing the plan of action for poverty eradication during the period from 2018 to 2027. In addition to this sequence of ten-year plans, the UN declared its Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, with 'eradicating extreme poverty and hunger' as the first goal to be achieved by the year 2015. We are now living through the period of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) again, with 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere' as the first goal to be achieved by the year 2030. Looking at the history of all these declarations and what the world has achieved in eradicating poverty over the years, one might start wondering whether these are realistic goals for sustaining economic development without driving more and more people into poverty. A more important concept to be examined carefully is the ability to reduce poverty using the same economic concepts and political frameworks as those used to create it.

Why haven't the measures taken by governments and international organisations worked as expected so far? Can there be a fundamental flaw in the framework within which the world is trying to solve these problems? It will not be inappropriate for Sri Lankans to narrow the scope of such questions down to 'Why haven't the measures taken by governments and the IMF worked as expected so far? Can there be a fundamental flaw in the framework

within which the IMF and Sri Lankan governments have been trying to solve these problems?’ After all, this is the seventeenth time the country is hoping to be rescued by the IMF. Even if the public, in general, cannot be expected to have sufficient knowledge about economics and world politics, to understand such complicated matters as the intentions and motives of world economic powers, it certainly wouldn’t be unfair to expect economists and other intellectuals and the policymakers of the country to do so. The only way a country can be assured of having such knowledgeable people along the decision-making pipeline is to have a system of education designed to produce them. That is why the importance of understanding what has happened in the last hundred years, not only in economics education but also in education in general and social science education in particular, cannot be ignored.

Economics, as a subject, is being taught around the world as the field of study that analyses possible methods of managing limited resources while satisfying the unlimited needs and wants of human beings. There is enough in the world for everyone’s needs, but not enough for everyone’s greed. Is it possible to introduce a field of study that would analyse the most effective methods of fulfilling humans’ limited needs and wants using not only the limited physical resources but also the unlimited spiritual resources humans either already have or have the potential to acquire? If the awareness of people about their responsibilities and contributions towards economic growth and poverty reduction in their own neighbourhoods, can be increased then it will make it easier for everyone to understand the expectations of contribution from: parents in establishing ethical and moral standards in their children, educators in making learners aware of economic and social concepts, religious leaders in making people aware of the importance of developing compassion into their perception of the ‘path to success and happiness’ and policy makers in understanding the importance of their role in creating a just society which would encourage the participation and contribution of each and every member of the society with their compassionate and innovative thinking about how to achieve a sustainable economic growth that would keep reducing poverty instead of increasing the income gap and destroying the environment. The author’s description of how and why younger generations are losing interest in Economics as a subject other than learning it through Business and Management studies degree programs, and due to the introduction of higher-level mathematics in the curriculum can be an eye opener for all the stakeholders mentioned above.

Since the volume is about “One Hundred Years of Social Science Education in Sri Lankan Universities”, the reader would have benefited more from the information about how some of the leading universities around the world have catered to changing socio-economic-political factors through appropriate adjustments in their educational programs if there had been an attempt to discuss what Sri Lankan universities have achieved over the last hundred years in comparison to other universities around the world. The narrow-mindedness displayed by both educationists and policymakers in the country becomes evident when considering instances like the unsuccessful collaborative efforts between the Universities of Jaffna and Colombo to establish joint degree programs in science and education. This failure primarily stems from the inability of academics and administrators to reach a consensus on a seemingly simple matter: whether to designate the program as a BSc or a BEd. Distribution of the workload among the lecturers and timetabling issues are also mentioned as some of the barriers to cross-disciplinary collaboration in the field of Education. Inability to get much needed collaborations off the ground due to petty-minded reasons such as the name of the degree or the timetabling and workload issues, while the rest of the world is moving towards cross-disciplinary teaching/learning and research, the author of the chapter provides, perhaps unintentionally, a good opportunity for the reader to think how much of the responsibility for those failures would fall back on the very same Education Faculties for creating educators with incompetence and such selfish behaviour through the education system of the country.

In conclusion, the initiative by the UGC and the efforts of producing ‘*Beyond Boundaries: One Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities; Volume II: Social Sciences*’ could be appreciated by the reader mainly since it provides important information about the evolution of these disciplines over the last one-hundred-years. It certainly would help the reader understand why the country is where it is today with respect to Social Science Education.

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