OUSL Journal (2007)
Vol. 4, (pp. 118-123)

Convocation Address - VI

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(Emeritus Professor, 28 November 2006)

I am deeply honoured by the distinction conferred on me today. One can think of no more valued and appropriate recognition that a researcher and an academic can receive than that bestowed by one's peers and colleagues. I feel compelled to speak on this occasion, not on my own field of research, archaeology, the investigation and the reconstruction of the past, but on the subject of higher education, the pressing concerns of our university system, in the present and the immediate future. I do this with some hesitation because I have little to say that is original. I have been talking and writing on this theme for the last decade or more - so at least some of you will know that I repeat myself - and my reflections are not those of a specialist, a student of the subject. Rather they are those of a person who was persuaded 25 years ago to give up (with considerable reluctance) research time to the cause of university administration and institutional development. I have both the advantages and disadvantages of a person who has walked the terrain of higher education, sometimes (I like to think) at its frontlines, without the benefit of immersion in much background of theory and analysis - an indulgence I would not concede to a student of any subject.

A University convocation is an occasion for celebration, a ritual of fruition and completion. Whenever I have any doubts about the quality of our universities - and I am sure that all of us do have those doubts and will also agree that questioning and criticism are the essence of progress and development - these are immediately dispelled when I meet with so many excellent products of our university system, of all generations, in many different working situations. The human potential that is so often reflected by the university product, the intellectual and social energies that are generated and released by the university experience, seem to outstrip any deficiencies that are there are in the educational and professional training universities impart.

Rich traditions

Higher education in Sri Lanka has a centuries old history, going back to very ancient times. I have no doubt that it is this deep historical background and rich traditions of study, scholarship, reflective thinking and intellectual, artistic, literary, scientific and technological activity that underlies the intellectual landscape and scholastic environment of our universities, however good or bad the systems and institutions we have established may be. It is an extraordinary national resource that our culture, past and present, attaches high value to knowledge.

Evolution of the modern university system

These traditions form the prehistory of our modern university system, which has its historic roots in the 19th century. If we periodise the evolution of modern tertiary education in Sri Lanka, we see at least five clear stages of development: *one*, the early beginnings in the late 19th century when a number of tertiary institutions were established, all of which survive in one subsumed form or another in our present universities; *two*, the commencement of the first degree-oriented institutions in the 1920s and '30s - first the University College in 1921, and then (very little known) the first courses for the first purely Sri Lankan degrees at the Vidyalankara Pirivena in the late 1930s ; *three*, the establishment of our own modern universities in the decades between the 1940s and 1960s; *four*, the experiments of the late 1960s under the NCHE and the single university concept of the 1970s. And, *finally*, the establishment, consolidation and continued expansion of the present system, a system of independent, state-funded universities under the regulatory umbrella of the UGC, which has lasted from the early 1980s onwards.

Each of these developments represented a basic change, a major step in the evolution of university education. However, it is also true that the insides of the system, the working methods, have not changed fundamentally, at least since the mass expansion of university education that began in the 1960s.

Nevertheless, the two-and-half decades of the UGC system can also be divided into two phases: first, *a period of institutional formation in the 1980s* - which created the basic framework that has been, and continues to be, replicated in the expansion of campuses and institutes – and period of institutional formation in the 1980s - and, next, a period of critical re-examination and attempts at qualitative change in

the last decade-and-a-half. While universities, by their very nature - and at their very best - pay continual attention to quality improvement, the present discourse on the qualitative dimensions of the UGC system has as its landmarks the *Higher Education Sector Survey Report* of 1990 and the *University Reform* process that began some years later.

Three frontiers

Today we have three major, interconnected frontiers in higher education. They are obvious, but they always merit repetition. They are:

1. the question of access: increasing access to university education so that everyone who wants to enter a university is able to do so;

2. the issue of quality improvement: improving the quality of tertiary education and training;

3. widening and deepening the intellectual landscape and intellectual product

All other issues that confront the university system such as the establishment of new institutions, faculties and departments, increasing intake, revising admission criteria, promoting open and distance learning, curriculum development, new courses, the fundamental shift from teacher-centred to student-centred learning, accreditation and quality assurance, student employability and the university's relationship with the world of work, faculty formation, staff training, funding formulae, English, IT, research funding, continuing education, etc are sub-sets of these 'frontier' realms. Without in anyway trying to be comprehensive, I would like to make some random observations on a few issues within that larger framework.

Access

The question of access – of admission to courses of higher studies and post-secondary professional training – is the field that has mostly occupied policy makers and is very closely bound up with the objectives and work of the Open University. It is certainly one of the principal problems of tertiary education in Sri Lanka and it gets a great deal of policy attention. But we also need to look at access in a way. We need to emphasise that, apart from the Open University, to which

access is also limited, there is a whole new realm of open access possibilities both within the state education sector and outside it. The most important point is that there are as many students in this open access realm as there are internal undergraduates. This includes the large external degree programs of the universities, a number of professional and technical training institutions both within and outside state-sponsorship, and the increasing role being played by institutes preparing students for foreign university degrees. Though exact figures are hard to come by, we can say that there are more people studying in this open access realm – including the external degree programs – than there are internal students in all the universities put together. This is a little researched and little emphasized fact, which has very important policy implications and which we should look at in a positive and innovative way.

I may illustrate the inherent potential of the open access approach by just one example: I am told that institutions offering foreign degrees in Sri Lanka in Computer science and IT graduated over 900 persons in 2005 while the state university system enrolled slightly under 500 internal students for these subjects in the same year.

It is true, of course, that IT is a special sector and that, if we look at the whole range of subjects, there are great variations in the quality of external degree and open access education and training. There are also variations in completion rates, in the time taken to qualify, but all these questions should be part of a major focus of attention that we should direct at the open access resource in both the state and the private sectors. Once again we might say that the fullest development and expansion of the OUSL will be a major factor in this equation - and one that an occasion like this convocation symbolises and celebrates.

Quality and relevance

The discussion on expanding access inevitably leads us to the discussion of quality. I think it is true of universities all over the world that there are two attitudes to the question of quality. One is the constant attempt by faculty and policy makers to improve quality. The other is self-satisfaction and inertia, the contentment with the status quo. The crucial questions are: what is the dominant of these two modalities at one given moment of time, and by what standards does one measure quality?

In Sri Lanka the question of quality improvement has been a subject of attention at least since the Needham Commission report of 1960 [the

report of a commission chaired by that great scientist and historian of science, Joseph Needham]. But it is only in the last decade or so that quality has come to be recognised as being as important a challenge facing the universities as access. I can think of a number of measures that we took in the 1990s and early 2000s which had the quality of university education as their focus - such as curriculum reform, staff training, faculty selection and promotion, postgraduate studies, increased emphasis on English and IT, the IRQUE Project, the 28-point Action Plan for Humanities and Social Sciences (in the formulation and development of which the OUSL played a major role), increased research funding, and most recently the effort to set up a quality assurance and accreditation process and agency.

There also been much discussion about the question of the relationship between the university and the world of work, and of graduate employment and the country's human resource needs - crystallised in the title and objectives of the IRQUE project, a major attempt to seriously address and resource the issues of quality and relevance. This question takes its most acute form in the issue of graduate employability, which is periodically side-stepped by governmental graduate absorption programs. This underlines the fact that the quality and relevance of university education is also ultimately related to economic growth and the policy perspectives relating to such matters as structural reform and the growth or contraction of the state sector.

Intellectual environment

Quality and relevance is inevitably bound up with the third dimension, the intellectual landscape, the intellectual environment, the qualitative and collective intellectual product of the university community. As a researcher who believes in the intense satisfaction and inestimable value of intellectual discovery, in originality and the creation of new knowledge, in the enrichment of intellectual discourse, notions of quality and relevance today, I fear, have become dominantly technocratic. It is true that universities have always addressed the task of producing a society's professional classes, but they have always done this by also nurturing the highest levels and fredest forms of intellectual activity of all kinds. To do this we have to promote the notion of excellence, to calibrate our best level of intellectual activity with international standards and global levels.

I have often used Singapore as a metaphor illustrating the direction many forward policy makers amongst us would like us to go. If you would permit me to repeat something I wrote some years ago: "*We admire the economic and technological development of Singapore, its managerial efficiency, its urban comforts, its greenery and floral townscapes, its smooth transport systems .But the question also looms large of how do we achieve that without the "Singaporization" of the mind, the monochromatic globalisation of culture, the derivative and second hand intellectual constructs. Significantly, Singapore itself is now much more conscious of this dilemma than we are".*

"The universities of this country have the responsibility of being the apex of the country's intellectual pyramid. With the wide variety of disciplines concentrated within its bounds, the university system is in a unique position to play a forward role in high level and innovative thinking and in such special areas such as the dialogue between the natural and social sciences and the humanities, and the encounter between tradition and modernity."

You will allow me as an archaeologist to expand the idea of a pyramid to the university system itself. I envision the universities as an educational pyramid whose base is wide and wide open to everyone, whether they have pre-requisites or not. We should open our doors to the country as whole. We should then pay attention to the middle level, the substantial body of the pyramid, and, finally, make the best possible resources available to the apex. This would enable us combine the notion of excellence with social responsibility and social justice.

By its very nature and objectives the Open University is very well placed to do that - to network the intellectual resources of the entire university system and provide for us national and international calibration in academic standards and the means to reach them. I know that you have the vision and the potential to address yourselves to that challenge and that you have the opportunity to be a trailblazer in the way forward for the public university system in Sri Lanka.