GENERAL ARTICLE

Reflections on change and challenges for higher education

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Abstract: Recent decades have witnessed rapid change occurring in society around us, especially with regard to globalization, market forces which go hand in hand with globalization, technology which has facilitated and expedited globalization and the creation of a knowledge economy and a skills demand. This article examines in detail each of the above facets of change and the challenges such change poses for higher education in general and as a consequence, the challenges faced by Sri Lankan universities in particular.

FACETS OF CHANGE

The environment in which higher education, and for that matter, all education, operates is experiencing rapid change. Change is discernible in the society around us, in our economies, our political systems, affecting our age-long cultures, relationships, aspirations and day to day living. Change results from various forces, especially those which have evolved and advanced rapidly in a relatively short space of time.

Even though the impact of change may vary from one place on earth to another, change that occurs today is affecting every part of this globe, on an unprecedented scale. Thus globalization has become a force driving change. In addition, the emergence of a knowledge-economy, skills demand, market forces which go hand in hand with globalization, technology which has facilitated and expedited globalization and the creation of a knowledge economy, are potent forces leading to change. Together these powerful forces (globalization, technology, and an economy increasingly driven by knowledge and innovation) have according to Friedman (2005) flattened our world, leveling the playing field for the participation of billions of people once excluded from the industrial economy. We cannot ignore here, the demographic changes that are occurring in several parts of the globe, especially in the developed economies of the West as well as in the East. Hand in hand with the above forces, we witness environmental degradation and destruction which has put at peril the sustainability of the planet we live in.

Let us look at each of these, briefly.

The new Millennium has been described as an age of knowledge, in which the resource for prosperity has become knowledge itself. Unlike natural resources utilized in the economic transformation that took place earlier, knowledge is inexhaustible; the more it is used, the more it multiplies and expands. Today, the emphasis is shifting from creating and transporting physical objects to knowledge itself. Knowledge accumulation is increasingly at the core of a country's competitive advantage, which is itself determined by the ability to innovate in a continuous manner (Holm-Nielsen). As Duderstadt (2008) states "Today, our world has entered a period of rapid and profound economic, social, and political transformation driven by the emergence of a radically new system for creating wealth that depends upon the creation and application of new knowledge and hence upon educated people and their ideas".

Globalization has been described as "…… a process whereby national boundaries of economic activity are removed in order to allow freer access to technology, markets of inputs and goods, and a wide range of human tastes and customs, thereby facilitating a higher degree of integration of the world economy" (Levy-Livermore, 1998). US National Intelligence Council (2004) predicts that globalization, the growing interconnectedness reflected in the expanded flows of information,

technology, capital, goods, services and people throughout the world, will become an overarching mega-trend, a force so ubiquitous that it will substantially shape all other major trends in the world of 2020. During the last decade, globalization was predicted to have a salutary effect on the development of all nations, developed and developing, which failed to become a reality; yet today with the credit crunch, we see how globalization can be as powerful in creating adverse consequences for almost all nations.

Markets have become a concomitant feature of globalization and the knowledge economy with the removal of national boundaries to allow freer movement of goods, inputs and people. Lowering of trade barriers has created global enterprises with such business paradigms as out-sourcing and off-shoring and a shift from public to private equity investment. We are familiar with multi-national companies with their headquarters in one continent setting up their production units in other continents as is happening with automobile, pharmaceutical, and banking industries.

Consequently, there is a shift from specific knowledge per se, which could be termed as inert, surface or rote learning to skills. As Hanna (2003) explains currently, there is (1) a focus on abstract concepts, (2) a holistic as opposed to a discrete approach, (3) student's ability to manipulate symbols, (4) student's ability to acquire and use knowledge, and (5) blur the distinction between manual and mental labour, (6) encourage students to work in teams and (7) to be a member of virtual teams around the world.

Technology has contributed in a large way to bring together countries which are located in places far from each other, and also to improve social relations among individuals, groups and nations. In fact, Dahlman (2006) argues that technology is an increasingly important element of globalization and of competitiveness and that the acceleration in the rate of technological change is a pre-requisite to participate effectively in globalization.

New technologies open access to the minds of the world where new partnerships and alliances between institutions, nations and races are based upon networked information flows (Kenway, 1998). Yet, the cheap, fast and easy exchange of funds and information that has enabled a global reality readily facilitates the adaptation of knowledge into a marketable commodity (Marginson, 1999). With commodification, nation states are able to move away from a government funded education system to a more market driven situation where the opportunities

and abilities to sell education become imperative to the earnings of institutions. We are familiar with the concept of the University in the Marketplace.

Demographic factor is also undergoing rapid change. Thus the populations of most developed countries in North America, Europe and Asia are ageing rapidly. Half of the world's population today lives in countries where fertility rates are no longer sufficient to replace their current populations. Over the next decade the percentage of population over 60 will grow from 30 to 40% in many of these countries. Such ageing populations have serious implications for workforce development, as the ageing populations tend to shift public priorities from investment in the future, notably in education to the needs of the elderly – retirement security, health care etc.

Migration is another aspect of demographic change in several countries. While the number of countries that is mono-ethnic, mono-religious or mono-lingual is very few, migration has changed the status quo of different component groups, mainly in developed countries. Immigrants in host countries create a need for absorbing immigrant cultures, to cater to diversity to enable them full participation socially, politically and economically in order to achieve social equity.

Finally there is the issue of global change. Catastrophic devastations that were experienced during the preceding decade, including the Tsunami, frequent earthquakes and tropical storms took toll of an innumerable number of lives and property. These costly and life-destroying disasters are interpreted as fragments of a far bigger picture of environmental devastation that awaits a world ignoring the warnings that they carry.

While the above can be seen as disparate strands of an overarching change that we are experiencing today, yet it is noteworthy that these strands are inextricably inter-wined with each other, mutually responsive and reactive. These forces do not operate independent of each other or in isolation.

CHALLENGES FOR HIGHER EDUCATION ARISING FROM CHANGE

The above forces challenge higher education systems to redefine their roles and responsibilities, review their mission and vision statements and come up with more relevant and timely action plans. Let us now examine these challenges.

Knowledge economy has intensified the education requirements at every level from secondary to tertiary to post-graduate and lifelong learning. In 1996 Clark stressed that the expansion and complexity in the knowledge with which universities now deal is one of the salient forces for change in higher education. Thus in USA, the National Governors Association has emphasized that "The driving force behind the 21st Century economy is knowledge and developing human capital is the best way to ensure prosperity" (NCSL, 2006). As explained clearly by Drucker (2005) knowledge economy demands a highly educated citizenry enabled by development of a strong system of education at all levels. It also requires institutions with the ability to discover new knowledge, develop innovative applications of these discoveries, and transfer them into the marketplace through entrepreneurial activities. Knowledge produced in this manner can immediately or with little delay be disseminated to populations dispersed across the globe as a result of growing interconnectedness. What is also important to note here is that while a half a century ago, the emphasis was on educating 'the best and brightest', the academically elite, the skills race of today values the skills and knowledge of the entire workforce as a key to economic prosperity, national security and social well-being.

Thus the stress is on massification, the need to dramatically broaden participation in higher education to build a competitive workforce. United States has been ranked as the first among 151 countries in tertiary enrolment (Nation Master, 2010). Table 1 given below indicates the relative positioning in tertiary education among selected countries.

Table 1 : Enrolment in Tertiary Education in Selected Countries

Developed Countries	% in Tertiary Education	Rank	Newly Industrialized & Developing Countries	% in Tertiary Education	Rank
United States	72.6	1	Thailand	35.3	43
Russia	64.1	6	Malaysia	28.2	57
Australia	63.3	7	Indonesia	14.6	85
United Kingdom	59.5	11	India	10.5	94
Japan	47.7	29	China	7.5	103
Germany	46.3	31	Sri Lanka	5.1	112
Singapore	33.7	46	Nepal	4.6	114

Source: Nation Master (undated) Tertiary enrolment statistics – countries compared www.nationmaster.com/.../edu_ter_enr- Retrieved 21/09/2010

Educational Policy Institute (EPI) (2005) in its Global Higher Education Rankings uses the methodology developed by the Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada to estimate participation in higher education. The participation rate for each country is the participation rate for the four-year age range in which that country has the highest four-year participation rate. In a group of 13, United States ranks as the 7th with a participation rate of 20.3% for the 18-21 age group and the first with an attainment rate of 31%. EPI also calculates an Educational Equity Index (EEI) which quantifies educational inequity by measuring the degree to which students from high socio-economic status backgrounds are over-represented in higher education. In EEI rankings United States gets the rank of 7 only with an EEI score of 57. It is due to these concerns that countries like USA, are calling for improving accessibility, and continuing affordability in spite of higher rates of enrolment in tertiary education. The need to provide an alternative admissions path for high school graduates who traditionally have not qualified for admittance is stressed here.

The target groups who need to be drawn into higher education, are those who have for generations been deprived of higher education. Thus in USA, 53% of the population is from Latin American and Asian origin. In Asian countries, the privileged urban elite had more opportunity to gain a higher education than the disadvantaged, remote poor or those from so-called low socio-economic groups or backward communities. Thus the University of California now provides a new path for admission of the top four per cent of graduating students in each California high school and provides opportunities for students from communities with traditionally low college-going rates. Affirmative action in college admissions has been accepted in most countries, in spite of continuing backlash against them. National Commission on the Future of Higher Education, USA (2005) has shown that qualified young people from families of modest means are far less likely to go to college than their affluent peers with similar qualifications. Thus the Commission recommended that financial student aid programmes should be restructured to focus upon the needs of lower income and minority students, placing a much higher priority on need-based financial aid programmes. India also recognizes that the current 09% enrolment in the 17-23 age cohort should be increased at least 20% if she is to compete with advanced economies. The government was bent on extending higher education and technical skills to disadvantaged groups such as Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and other Backward Classes, by reserving 49.5% of seats in Central Universities, professional colleges and elite

colleges (Gupta, 2006) which recommendation however has not yet been approved by the Supreme Court.

The paradigm shift to lifelong learning also needs attention here. In the face of explosion of knowledge in almost every field, the shell life of education provided early in one's life is shrinking rapidly. Moreover, longer life expectancy and lengthening working careers create an on-going need to refresh one's knowledge and skills through formal and informal learning. Higher education needs, recognize this shift and develop continuing education programmes to satisfy the demand.

It is really this kind of demand that has triggered the evolution of Mega Universities. Thus Allama Iqbal OU in Pakistan, Shanghai Television University in China, Indira Gandhi National OU in India, Bangladesh OU, Universitas Terbuka in Indonesia, Korean National OU, University of South Africa, OUUK and Universidad Nacional de Education a Distancia of Brazil each have more than 100,000 students enrolled in their programmes. Here the stereotypes regarding distance education being a poor cousin of conventional universities do not hold any longer. In USA 35 states have a virtual university. Johns Hopkins, Cornell, Duke, Rice and Stanford Universities are experimenting with the digital way of delivering knowledge products. Yale and Chicago have begun talking about distance education. In Sri Lanka, too, conventional universities have commenced external degree programmes for those who have not been successful in gaining admission to universities and the barrier of age has been removed to make life-long learning a reality.

Universities need to pay attention to the cyber infrastructure, information and communications technologies that evolve exponentially and its impact on teaching-learning. Thus higher education institutions serious about meeting the challenges of technology need to invest in faculty members who can model their experience and pass it on to their students. Learning technologies are no longer the sole responsibility of the units responsible for computer, information technology and telecommunications. They permeate the entire institution and how they are utilized, implemented and evaluated can advance or retard the overall development and progress of the institution.

In response to the skills demand, the higher education institutions need to focus more directly on helping students to develop the skills necessary to be successful in today's economy, which values and rewards the ability to work in teams, to develop creative approaches to

problem-solving and to learn continuously. Institutions that focus on helping students know how to learn and how to apply what they learn to real life situations will be increasingly valued. Hanna (2003) predicts that those institutions that continue to measure learning by relatively unconnected assessment processes such as content examinations, multiple-choice tests and other forms of memorization and recall will increasingly be at a competitive disadvantage.

One activity which demands our scrutiny is the philosophy of open source software development to open up opportunities for learning and scholarship to the world by putting previously restricted knowledge into the public domain and inviting others to join both in its use and development. MIT led the way with its OpenCourseWare (OCW) initiative, placing the digital assets supporting almost 1,800 courses in the public domain on the internet for the world to use (Vest, 2006). Today, over 150 universities have adopted the OCW paradigm to distribute their learning assets to the world. Open source, open content, open learning and other 'open' technologies have become the scaffolding on which to build global universities – what Vest refers to as the 'meta' university, 'a transcendent, accessible, empowering, dynamic, communally-constructed framework of open materials and platforms on which much of higher education world wide can be constructed or enhanced'.

We also talked about global environmental change which demands a programme of action for global sustainability. It is relevant to note here that environmental education, developed in response to the need to address issues of sustainability, some time ago, has now broadened into a more comprehensive concept, encompassing interrelated environmental economic, and social issues. The key themes of sustainable development now include among other things, poverty alleviation, citizenship, peace, ethics, democracy and governance, justice, security, human rights, health, gender equity, cultural diversity, rural and urban development, production and consumption patterns, corporate responsibility, environmental protection, natural resource management, and biological and landscape diversity (UNESCO, 2003). It is not necessary to analyse why such a large number of themes have now become elements of sustainable development. Poverty is a root cause of insecurity, poor health and inequity in socio-economic, gender, ethnic and religious areas. These in turn become issues of human rights, democracy, justice, development and peace. The Graz Declaration on Committing Universities to Sustainable Development concluded that universities as the location of academic education, bear a distinctive responsibility for

the students and their professional moral quality as future leaders in society and economy and as major contributors to research, they should tackle questions which rise in connection with the transition of societies around the world towards more sustainable development.

At the same time, the other forces that we referred to earlier, especially the markets, pose as a barrier to accomplishing the ambitious objectives that we spoke of. In most societies, universities have been established as a result of public policy and public investment through government action. These policies were driven by a commitment to strong social values. Education was perceived as a public good and the universities were established to benefit all of society. Yet today, across the globe, public leaders are increasingly discarding such public policies in favour of market forces to determine priorities for social investment. The earlier perceptions are rapidly eroding under commercialization. The new message is that education is a private good that should be paid for by the individuals who benefit more directly, the students. In USA, this trend has led to a growing concern about the state of the public research universities. State support for most of America's flagship public universities (e.g. California, Washington, Illinois, North Carolina) has declined to less than 20% of their operating budgets and some have less than 10%. In sharp contrast, many private universities have managed to build large endowments, to become independent of the education marketplace.

SRI LANKA'S ATTEMPTS TO MEET CURRENT CHALLENGES

In discussing how Sri Lankan universities are attempting to meet the current challenges they are confronted with, I would focus only on three recent initiatives: the IRQUE (Improving Relevance and Quality of University Education) Project, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) initiative under the University Grants Commission and the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) under the Ministry of Higher Education. All three initiatives were attempts to address the deficiencies identified in the Sri Lankan University system, especially the need to improve relevance and quality and to extend access to tertiary education.

The major purpose of the IRQUE Project, which is perhaps the over-aching initiative, envisaged the setting up of a system, which will end the chronic problem of unemployed and under-employed graduates. It sought to encourage all universities to ensure quality and relevance in all their undergraduate courses. The project planned to

fund degree programs on a selective basis to overcome their identified weaknesses so that undergraduates could face their future with confidence, and obtain employment more quickly and with higher remuneration. It was hoped that undergraduates would also benefit from grants provided to universities to improve English language competency, improve IT skills, and improved student services. The aim of the project was stated as providing undergraduates with a complete and balanced tertiary education, to mould them into responsible, educated citizens of our country.

Specific components of the project were,

(1) Building institutional capacity in the tertiary education system through
  ▪ Strengthening national planning, monitoring and evaluation systems, and coordination at the national level
  ▪ Establishing the Board for Quality Assurance (BQA).
  ▪ Strengthening management of public universities and faculties.
  ▪ Enhancing public awareness.
  ▪ Monitoring and evaluation.

(2) Improving relevance and quality of tertiary education by
  ▪ Establishing a Quality Enhancement Fund (QEF) to allocate resources to improve undergraduate degree study programs in private TEI's.
  ▪ Tharuna Aruna II Program (Young Professional II program).

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) was established to review programmes of study offered by various departments of study (Subject reviews) and the quality of higher education institutions (Institutional Reviews).

Distance Education Modernization Project attempts to extend higher education opportunities to those who are denied university education through online programmes for the first time in the country. The opportunity to follow these on a flexi-schedule while working as well as the possibility to use a network of Access Centres spread-island wide would be extra motivating factors. An important component of the DEMP was Enhancing the Capacity of the Open University (OUSL-CE). It was expected that similar to the IRQUE Project, DEMP also will produce more employable graduates through quality programmes at a reduced cost.

While it is not possible to make a valid assessment of

these initiatives as they are on-going, we will examine whatever evidence is available to find out whether there are indicators of potential success.

Extending access

In the space of almost three decades (1980 – 2007), the percentage of Sri Lanka's percentage of the age group which should gain entry to higher education (20-24 years) has increased from 1.2 (1980), to 1.6 (1990), 2.3 (2000) and 3.5 (2007). While this is a three-fold increase, it has to be compared with corresponding percentages in other countries.

In absolute numbers, the increase in university admissions was from 12,144 in 2002 to 17,196 in 2007, representing an increase from 13.3% of those eligible to enter university in 2002 to 14.3% in 2007. Total enrolment increased from 2005 to 2007 by 4105. Interestingly, the enrolment had increased in the disciplines of Arts, Management, Commerce, Science, Agriculture, Engineering, Architecture/Quantity Surveying and Food Science but decreased in Law, Dental Science, and Veterinary Medicine. In Medicine the numbers had increased by a mere 38.

Since the DEMP was initiated, one postgraduate diploma, two undergraduate degrees (IT and management), twelve diplomas and one certificate programme have been launched online. Two other courses (Educational Technology and Cardio Vascular Health) are also being offered online by the Open University. Together they have enrolled 677 students.

The Open University has increased its student number from 22,508 in 2003 to 24,373 in 2005 and 27,115 in 2008. Thus it is clear that extending access, a major priority in university education, is yet far from being achieved.

Improving Quality and Relevance in Undergraduate Education

During the last two decades increasing concern has been expressed about the quality of university education and the issue of unemployment of graduates has often linked to low quality of university education. The Presidential Task Force on University Education in 1997 pointed out that several factors such as (1) Expansion of facilities lagging far behind the increase of enrolments, (2) The loss resulting from the withdrawal of English as medium of instruction which is debilitating, (3) The absence of an academically stimulating environment, (4) Widespread

apathy among a majority of both staff and students and (5) Lectures degenerating into dictation had contributed to this situation.

The Quality Assurance Agency thus was expected to perform an important function in improving quality and relevance of undergraduate programmes. By end of April, 2009, 199 Subject/Programme Review Assessments had been completed.

▪ Five subjects/programmes, one from the University of Kelaniya and four from the University of Moratuwa had been given A (the highest possible judgment) for all the eight aspects.

▪ Nine other subjects had obtained A for seven out of the eight aspects: one from University of Kelaniya, four from University of Moratuwa, two from University of Peradeniya, and two from the University of Sri Jayawardenapura.

▪ At the other end of the spectrum, there were six subjects which had failed to obtain a single A for any of the eight aspects: one out of the ten assessed in the Open University, two out of the seven departments in the Rajarata University, one out of the two assessed in Sri Palee Campus, one out of the 13 assessed in the University of Jaffna, one out of the 30 assessed in the University of Kelaniya and one out of the 17 assessed in University of Ruhuna.

QAA notes that the universities/departments are weak in seven aspects, namely, Curriculum Design, Content and Review, Teaching, Learning and Assessment Methods, Extent and Use of Student Feedback, Peer Observation, Postgraduate Studies, Skills Development and Academic Guidance and Counselling. The only aspect in which the institutions/departments were satisfactory was indicated as Quality of Students, Students' Progress and Achievement. This is indeed a tragic situation, to say the least! Even though the university faculty does teach the students, how much they can claim credit for students' quality, and achievement is dubious. Especially of concern are Postgraduate studies (20%) and peer observation (26%) being unsatisfactory. Elsewhere (Gunawardena, 2001) I have spoken about the importance of postgraduate studies to enhance what we call 'Faculty Cultures" leading to high quality research, teaching and innovations.

IRQUE offers training and technical assistance to help institutions modernize their practices in strategic planning, financial management, human resource

management, academic management, and management of buildings and equipment. Institutional grants are available for special programs to strengthen management, student services, social harmony, improved English language competency, and computer skills of teachers and graduates. It also supports quality improvement block grants for study programs to enhance the relevance and quality of undergraduate degree programs. It is beyond the scope of this paper to examine what has been attempted and what has been achieved under these components. However, what was noted under progress of Institutional Block Grants one can see only how the money has been allocated.

It is disappointing to note that the zeal to address issues raised by the stakeholders, mainly the market forces has resulted in a move to marginalize programmes in the liberal arts or the humanities which have produced personnel, generation after generation, across the globe, required for national development, while meeting the need for individual holistic development.

Among other challenges identified by us above were learning and continuing education, utilizing newer modes of tertiary education – ODL, Dual mode, Online, maximizing benefits of technology for higher education, using the potential of Open Educational Resources and fulfilling skills in demand through offer of relevant and quality programmes for all of which DEMP could have contributed substantially.

DEMP offered matching grants to develop online programmes to partner institutions, which included hardware and software, training and state-of-the art Access centres which students from 22 districts could use. Universities could have spear-headed online programme development converting themselves to dual mode institutions rather than continue to offer external degrees, but it is depressing to note that only the universities of Moratuwa, Peradeniya and Jaffna have succeeded in launching degree programmes. It is heartening to note that the University of Colombo with four approved online programmes and four more awaiting approval has initiated a project on a virtual campus.

One strategy that can be employed for expediting programme development is to forge collaborative partnerships. Universities could offer the use of what they have developed as OERs or even explore the purchase option. When three universities were developing the same degree programme in Management, DEMP strove to make them agree to divide responsibility and develop a common programme which however, was rejected by all three universities. When English for Communication occurs as a subject in several programmes and when DEMP suggested that adaptations of what was developed for one institution be considered, that too was not received favourably.

It is also noteworthy how quality closely becomes interlinked with sustainability of higher education institutions at present. While increasing numbers of students look to overseas universities to obtain a higher education, concerns about quality in our own institutions penalize students who complete higher education locally, where employment is concerned. Systematic ways of identifying and classifying "World Class Universities" have now been developed. The methodology used by the Times Higher Education Supplement (THES) focuses most heavily on international reputation, combining subjective inputs(such as peer reviews and employer recruiting surveys), quantitative data (including the numbers of international students and faculty) and the influence of the faculty(as represented by research citations). It is noteworthy that among the top 50 universities there are universities from Hong Kong (China), New Zealand and Singapore besides the usual American and Western European universities (World Bank, 2009). It is imperative for Sri Lankan universities to improve their standing among at least Asian universities if we are to compete in today's higher education.

Global Sustainability

We are well aware of how new areas of study, be they human rights, gender or environmental issues compete with each other to be incorporated in to the already over-loaded curricula, at secondary as well as tertiary level. Even at present, we do have programmes focusing on environmental studies, mainly at postgraduate level and courses on environment even at undergraduate level, in the university curricula. Global sustainability is of too paramount an importance to be left to the interest of individual faculty and should be mainstreamed into undergraduate curricula, where the focus is not only on developing knowledge but more so on attitudes and values.

Higher education as a public good

A major reason which prompted the government of Sri Lanka to enter into Memoranda of Understanding with Funding Agencies was the criticism leveled at the quality of University education in this country. Thus the World Bank study of 1991, Higher Education Survey of 1994 and Asian Development Bank study of 2000 were overly

critical of the quality of university graduates. Most vocal among the critics were the private sector employers. Thus the hypothesis which emerged was that the market economies could generate more prosperity due to the greater freedom and scope available for individual choice, hard work, creativity and innovation, mediated and coordinated through the " invisible hand ' of incentives and information (Aturupane, 2009).

Thus IRQUE as well as the DEMP stretched their arms to woo the private sector. My own study (Gunawardena, 1992) showed that the private sector which demanded certain types of graduates were willing to employ very few graduates. Only one firm out of 50 in the sample said it could recruit 10 graduates for a year. Compare that with 40,000 graduates a year, which the state has been providing employment to. Of the partner institutions that deliver programmes with support from DEMP, the three universities (with four programmes and 2 courses) have an enrolment of 347, while the other 12 programmes have 330. Even when the programmes offered by the private educational institutions hold promise of better employability the issue of affordability cannot be ignored. Yet overall, the systems that we already have in place – free education, District Quotas, Mahapola Scholarships and university bursaries, even though how students with merit get overlooked is commented upon, ensure affordability to the economically poor and those residing in underprivileged areas.

When even free-market-dominated states such as United States are vociferously demanding that education is a public good which should not be compromised, and that state funding for universities should not be curtailed, we in Sri Lanka should ensure that what we have achieved through public-funded higher education should not be allowed to be sacrificed, especially as accessibility to higher education is related to affordability.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are several steps that the higher education system should take to change the status quo. For example, it is clear that QAA cannot stop at subject and institutional reviews. Review and assessment need to be followed up with developmental action, where statutory bodies like Faculty Boards and the Senates devote time and attention to the results of assessments and monitor departments to ensure that improvements of quality do occur without stopping at reviews. Otherwise, the time, energy and money spent on these reviews would surely be wasted. Setting up of Internal QA Units under the

Vice Chancellors is a welcome move in this direction. University teachers play a crucial role in such initiatives. The University teachers are "the holders and producers of the world's knowledge" (Morey, 1998). Their commitment to serve society, through knowledge produced and through their roles as teachers and transmitters of culture to students cannot be over-emphasized. They need to realize that their individual career mobility cannot be separated from institutional advancement. Every single step they take to advance in their own careers would be a step towards institutional advancement and will be mutually rewarding. Staff Development Centres/Units of Universities are required to take cognisance of the roles of university teachers and ensure that their function is not merely to hand over certificates to probationary lecturers to get confirmation but develop them to perform these exalted roles.

While external support for development of infrastructure and equipment and training are always welcome and should be maximally utilized, the onus of responsibility for achieving results falls squarely on the leadership, be it at the national level on UGC, or at institutional levels on the Vice-Chancellors, at the Faculty level on the Deans or at the Departmental level, on the Heads. All these persons, understandably, cannot work in isolation of each other. A Vice Chancellor would personify his/ her institution. He/She has to exercise leadership, but with a new style that is collaborative and decisive. The effort taken by the leaders at these different levels should be a concerted, collaborative effort. Communication, working in teams- inter-Departmental, inter-Faculty and inter-University, objective evaluation, monitoring and evaluation and sincere responsiveness to addressing issues stand out in this process.

Our interest in examining what happens globally is not to imitate what other countries are engaged in. It is to learn from their experiences and see how these experiences can be adapted to resolve problems and issues that we face currently. Mega-Universities and meta-universities are perhaps far beyond our reach. However, we need to focus on feasible options such as dual mode universities, online learning, collaborative partnerships and open educational resources to see how accessibility as well as quality and relevance can be improved. This will call for extra effort, updating and developing ourselves and more time commitment to use such strategies. Yet this is an imperative need and will bring us greater dividends in the form of individual and collective benefits.

Though twenty years have elapsed after Bloch made the following statement, I believe it is still valid:

"The solution of virtually all the problems with which the government is concerned, health, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, economic competitiveness, defence and national security, all depend on creating new knowledge & hence upon the health of our universities" (Bloch, 1988)

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