

Role of Newer Universities of Sri Lanka in the New Millennium: A Blend of Regional and National Models

Chancellor,
Vice Chancellor,
Members of the Council and the Senate,
Academic Staff and other Staff members,
Graduands,
Invitees

First of all, let me thank the Vice Chancellor and the Council of the South-Eastern University of Sri Lanka for inviting me to make the Convocation Address this morning. I feel honoured by this invitation. I would like to share my thoughts on the role the newer universities in Sri Lanka can perform in the context of challenges that lie before them in the new Millennium so that the South-Eastern University can reflect on these thoughts when they develop their vision for the future.

Emerging Role of Universities

Education is expected to play a pivotal role in development for it is people who develop a society. Within education, the segment of higher education assumes great significance, for it is through higher education that a nation produces the critical mass of 'leader' elements - the intellectuals, the

professionals, the entrepreneurs, the managers and the political leaders that a country needs for the development of the economy and the society.

The new Millennium has been described as an age of knowledge, in which the key resource for development has become knowledge itself. Unlike natural resources utilized in the economic transformation earlier, knowledge is inexhaustible: the more it is used, the more it multiplies and expands. The transformation that takes place in the new Millennium is marked by key changes taking place in several fronts. Today the emphasis is shifting from creating and transporting physical objects to knowledge itself. In such a context, the role performed by universities is even more enhanced.

As Block stated in 1988

“The solution of virtually all the problems with which the government is concerned, health, education, environment, energy, urban development, international relationships, economic competitiveness and defence and national security, all depend on creating new knowledge and hence upon the health of our universities’.

Universities lie at the heart of successful, leading economies around the world. All universities around the world share the common principal purposes:

1. **Teaching:** the education of appropriately qualified persons to enable them to take a leadership role in the intellectual, cultural, economic and social development of the nation and its regions;
2. **Research:** the creation and advancement of knowledge; and
3. **Service to Society:** the application of knowledge and discoveries to the betterment of communities in their own country and overseas

Some countries, for example, Australia, consider the encouragement of 'diversity so that all courses reflect the regional, social and cultural differences that impinge upon individual universities' as one of the goals of Higher Education (Winchester et al, 2006).

Specific Role of Regional Universities

The role that universities can perform in providing post - secondary education and regional development has been highlighted in recent years. On the one hand, they help bring the knowledge economy to the regions; provide educational opportunities for disadvantaged populations and areas; developing cultures of lifelong learning and provide centres of regional and international excellence in research. This research may be directly related to regional economies / needs or it may be in areas not specifically related to regional needs but which are internationally recognised as

providing skills, knowledge and experience which are critical to the development of the regions in which they are located. They provide cultural, sporting and physical infrastructure in the regions.

Secondly, they contribute to regional development through widening the employment base of the regions and providing opportunities for employment and retention of graduates in their home region; developing the skill base of regions through partnerships, training and professional development; providing a diverse range of courses, consultancy and research to complement regional needs. They are often a major regional employer and purchaser of services. This direct relationship is amplified by well - documented studies of the multiplier effect that establishment of universities have on providing employment and economic development in the surrounding areas. They provide community leadership in regional development in conjunction with state and local government and local economic enterprises.

As Pope and Miller (2001) aver, colleges and universities have a natural task of providing support and assistance to their local host communities. While all universities can perform these functions, they are more relevant for regional universities which are located away from major urban centres.

Newer Universities in the Sri Lanka's University System

In Sri Lanka, public commitment to university education has been high and until recently, university education was a government monopoly. The number of universities in Sri Lanka increased from eight in 1980 to fifteen in 2005. The expenditure on university education as a percentage of education increased from 14.24% in 1980 to 17.25% in 2005. Of the newer universities established after 1980 - the Eastern, South Eastern, Rajarata, Sabaragamuwa, Wayamba, and Uva Wellassa, are located outside the major cities, and were an innovative effort to decentralize university education and through them to contribute to regional development. They are smaller and in 2005, together catered to 13,252 (13.8%) out of a total of 96,092 students on roll. The total employees in these universities numbered 2079 (16.1%) of a total of 12,931. of the total capital government grant the newer universities received Rs.1,071.3m. (35.8%) out of a total of Rs.2990.m. understandably because of the commitments to infrastructure development. Of the total recurrent government grant of Rs. 7001.06 m., these universities were allocated Rs. 1281.72 m. or 18.3 per cent (University Grants Commission, 2006).

Public university education in Sri Lanka is expensive with high unit operating costs. Generally unit costs are related to student enrolment size with smaller universities experiencing high costs and larger universities which reap

the benefits of economies of scale, except the University of Peradeniya, experiencing low unit costs. The principal component of university average recurrent expenditure is the student-teacher ratio. Universities which have low student-teacher ratios (in newer universities the ratio is 3:1 while in larger universities, except University of Peradeniya it is 8:1)) have high unit costs. Universities with low student-teacher ratios also have higher average salary expenditures.

Among the specific factors contributing the quality of service delivery in public universities is the low academic salaries leading to staffing difficulties (World Bank, 2005). Academic staff salaries, though competitive in the public sector, is modest by private sector salaries. Competition for highly qualified university academics is from overseas universities, private higher educational institutions and research institutions. The newer universities, especially those located outside the principal urban centres find it difficult to attract qualified individuals to reside in these locations and this directly affects the quality of research and teaching.

The commitment made by Sri Lanka to develop universities in the periphery and the challenges that they are facing, is clear from the above brief analysis.

Challenges before Universities in the New Millennium

Writers have identified four major challenges to universities in the new Millennium. These challenges are (1) skills demand (2) markets (3) technology and (4) global sustainability (Duderstadt, 2002). Other challenges linked to the above are diversity, commercialization and competition. All these challenges are related to or are encompassed by the major forces of liberalization and globalization. Let us dwell briefly on each of these challenges.

Stakeholders - students, employers and the governments frequently articulate their concerns regarding the quality of education and skills of those who complete university education. With globalization, the skills demand is shaped by the staffing needs of global employers and of enterprises that are global in their activities and expectations. Thus globalization makes curricula more homogenous.

Universities in all societies have been established as a result of public policy and public investment through government action. These policies were drawn by a commitment to strong social values. Yet today across the globe, public leaders are increasingly discarding such public policies in favour of market forces to determine priorities for social investment and public universities can no longer expect policies and investment to shield them from market competition.

Education was conceived as a public good and the universities were established to benefit all of society. This perception is also rapidly eroding under commercialization. The new message is that education is a private good that should be paid for by the direct beneficiaries - the students. The above scenarios affect funding for research in universities. Reduced public funding for university research, for example, in United States, has propelled universities to seek industrial sponsorship.

In addition, liberal market forces compel universities to compete for resources, and for students. New educational providers including virtual universities and for-profit educational institutions, using evolving Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), offer demand - driven courses. Education has become a commodity to be traded like any other. A corollary of this situation is that the faculty in public universities is grabbed by private educational institutions and those in regional universities by those in the urban areas.

The fourth major challenge is Information and Communication Technology. These technologies allow universities to transmit information quickly, linking distant places and diverse areas of endeavour in productive ways. It is perceived that the application of ICT to the delivery of education will reduce costs, and using ICT would enable more people to access learning resources and enhance interactivity.

Newer Universities: The Way Forward

In the light of the above discussion, what should be the role of the newer universities in our country?

It is clear that we need to reflect on our expected roles, formulate goals and objectives and plan our strategies to achieve these goals and objectives in a systematic manner.

Firstly, it is important to understand that expectations from a University as a regional University cannot be ignored. Most of our newer universities are performing this function satisfactorily in relation to the provision of university education. However, we need to seriously think how these newer universities can, especially in the crucial issue of conflict that the country is facing today, become truly multi-cultural institutions, where youth experience interaction and understand that humanity supersedes ethnic or religious differences.

Secondly, newer universities need to evaluate themselves and find out the extent to which they have allowed access to educational resources, sporting and other cultural resources that they possess in order that their communities also benefit and feel bonded and get ownership of universities as a part of their own communities.

Thirdly, newer universities should reflect on their contributions to regional development, through development

of human resources, for example, by offering short training courses, awareness raising and / or human resource development in diverse areas such as management, environment, or language development in which the university has expertise. These initiatives would have mutual benefits, enabling universities to generate income and enable academics to develop expertise, use and apply their theoretical knowledge and also to plan these initiatives as research cum service initiatives. Application of generic solutions to solve contextual issues can contribute not only to career mobility of the academics but will definitely contribute to original knowledge.

It is clear that the roles of national and regional universities often overlap and that the distinctions blur to create a blended model. Location in a specific region / community thrusts certain responsibilities on newer, regional universities in any country but these responsibilities cannot make them ignore the fact that the graduates that they produce need to compete with their peers from other universities and perform in the national and perhaps in the international labour market. Each university should therefore evolve their own vision and plan their activities accordingly.

Leadership in these universities must make a concerted effort to visualize the blended model that we refer to here and identify the steps for moving towards such a model. We reiterate as others have done before, that leadership is a process through which the individuals (the leaders) secure

the cooperation of others (the followers) towards goal achievement in a particular setting. The prime importance of any leader is gaining the commitment of others to a vision and thus ensuring that the vision shapes the policies, plans and day-to-day activities in the organization. Leaders need to possess four significant attributes: vision, voice, action and credibility. In a University, the Vice Chancellor, the Deans and the Heads of Departments together with administrative staff should conceptualize the futuristic vision as a team and shape the policies and plans accordingly.

Finally, no university can afford to be oblivious of the rapidly advancing technologies that increasingly pervade our lives in the knowledge society. The universities have to provide resources to academic as well as non-academic staff, to develop their skills in ICT and thereby organize and manage their institutional activities more efficiently. All academic staff have to be provided with education and training to be equipped with skills needed for updating themselves in their own disciplinary areas as well as for moving away from the traditional lecture mode to make learning more stimulating for the learners.

In this venture, priority needs to be given to staff development as the major task of implementing the conceptual model will be the responsibility of the staff. In a University, academic staff is a critical element which contributes to its prestige and recognition. Here it is pertinent to look at the situation of newer universities.

Newer universities in Sri Lanka have 5.5% of the professor in the system, (23 out of 420), 13.6% of the senior lecturers (212 out of 1558) and 23.3% of lecturers (382 out of 1642). It is thus clear that the faculty in these universities has a narrow apex and a broader base.

Therefore in this venture, priority needs to be given to staff development as the major task of implementing the conceptual model will be the responsibility of the staff. It may be necessary for these universities as well as the University Grants Commission to seriously consider how the principle of affirmative action can be applied to give priority to the newer universities in training, scholarships and research funding.

Let me conclude by wishing the South-Eastern University success in developing such a forward-looking vision in the future and contributing to the development of young graduates who can perform effectively in their chosen careers in any part of the globe and also wishing the young graduates who are conferred their degrees today the best for the future.