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**CHALLENGES IN DELIVERING HIGHER
EDUCATION
IN THE SOUTH EASTERN SRI LANKA**

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Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Deans of the faculties, Heads of Departments, Acting Registrar, Members of the Academic Staff, Members of the Administrative Staff and Non Academic Staff, Distinguish Guest Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is my privilege and honour to address you at this 4th Convocation of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Therefore, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. A.G. Husain Ismail, the Vice Chancellor and the organizing committee for their kind invitation. I would like to take this opportunity to wish all the graduands a bright and prosperous future. The title of my speech is

Challenges in Delivering Higher Education in the context of the South East of Sri Lanka. I hope this theme is appropriate not only to the South Eastern University but also to other newly established universities in the country.

Conceptually a University is identified as a place for Learning, Research and Service. In the most traditional sense, a University has been defined as the visible representation of humankind's immortality, or in other words it is the institutional appearance of truth, the place where each age consciously and methodically hands over its higher order intellectual formations to the generations to follow. This concept has been further emphasized in establishing the Bologna University a millennium ago where the idea of a University as a place in which learned individuals transmit information and knowledge to learners has been practiced. In today's world it is understood that Universities or more broadly higher education institutions, are the main factor for the social and economic mobility of individuals, or in the long run at

macro level, a driving force for the changing profile of the societies and specific communities. Moreover, in a context characterized by complexity and accelerated change, higher education faces unexpected opportunities and complex challenges, many of which are crucial, composite and critical. This is what we are particularly experiencing today at the South Eastern region in Sri Lanka. As a responsible and dedicated institution of learning, the South Eastern University has a responsibility and commitment for the regional development in particular and at a broader level contribution for national development in a wider context. Under this setting it is pertinent that a higher education institute should explore all means to identify solutions to the current problems encountered within the region of its setting.

The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) and its predecessor, the South Eastern University College of Sri Lanka (SEUCSL) was established to meet the aspirations of the people of the South Eastern Sri Lanka to fulfill their

varied needs, ranging from intellectual to integral capacity build up. The University College was formally inaugurated on the 23rd October, 1995 and followed by the University proper commenced its academic activities on 15th May, 1996. Here I will be failing in my duties, if I do not recall the fact that it was the brainchild of Late Honorable M.H.M. Ashraff who really championed the case for eastern development in the national context. Since that time during the course of the last 12 years the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka has steered through successfully amidst several inherent problems and obstacles.

Let us examine now what are the usual challenges faced by a University in general. Universities are vibrant institutions that reflect the real political and socio-economic status of a country or a region in the case of a vast country. In other words, it is a barometer which displays the pulse of a nation. The Universities provide the platform for the intellectual cream of the society to act and

create a new culture and an innovative society. It also should be remembered that, no longer that the HEIs are expected to provide quality teaching and conduct relevant research, but more and more they are expected to play a key role as an agent of regional development, especially in the case of a regional University. Such commitments are expected to be carried out in an environment characterized by scarce and limited resources, increased scrutiny and calls for transparency and accountability from a multitude of internal and external stakeholders. In the Sri Lankan context, in the south eastern region, the issues are further confounded by the multiethnic characteristic settling in within a conflict based environment.

The engagement of a higher education institution in regional development constitutes three dimensions as Goddard & Chatterton had pointed out in 2003 in a book entitled *Economic Geography of Higher Education : Knowledge, Infrastructure and Learning Regions*, edited by

Boekama et al and Published by Routledge, in London.

They are;

1. creation of knowledge through research and its utilization by transfer of technology to meet the regional needs (skills & competencies),
2. transfer of knowledge through human resource development, education, localizing the learning process by work-based learning, graduate employment in the region, and continuing education and professional development on the basis of demand (innovation), and
3. inherent cultural and community development, creating the milieu of social cohesion and sustainable development on which innovation depends (culture & community).

In the above context, the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka should first of all plan out a strategy to gain the confidence of the people as an institution devoted for their own welfare and development. The University should take proactive measures to win and improve the hearts, heads and hands of the people in order to be an effective partner in enhancing the quality of life of the people of the area. This needs first of all building up confidence within the University of their region. However, if a Higher Education Institution displays instability in its own management with overt weaknesses due to petty issues, the larger community would obviously lose confidence on the system. Such loss of confidence would definitely pose the threat of being subdued unnecessarily on non-significant issues. Obviously, the authorities and the management of the Higher Education Institutions are sometimes forced to get entangled on issues of trivial nature although they may divert your attention and energies on unnecessary issues. Therefore, I suggest that the first step that should be taken by a Higher Education

Institution to build up the confidence of the people, is to identify its own weaknesses in terms of its image within the immediate society. Perhaps it could be done on a SWOT analysis. Thereafter, a proactive programme should be drawn to educate first the personnel of the Higher Education Institution on the importance of overcoming the deficiencies. Thereafter, an aggressive marketing strategy should be introduced to educate all stakeholders on the proposed plans. More importantly, the staff should be adequately trained to handle the proposed corrective measures on a practical approach. The staff should be committed and sincere and given responsibility. It is also important to look into the welfare and recognition of contributions made by the staff and students in promoting the development of a Higher Education Institution. Very often the above issues may not be considered as high priority due to pressure exerted by other trivial and less important issues. However, it is the farsighted vision of the leadership of the Higher Education Institution to ensure that certain basic issues related to staff

development and obtaining their cooperation is ensured through a well designed approach. In this respect I am happy to note that the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka is taking progressive efforts to overcome its minor problems encountered during the past year to build up confidence within the Higher Education Institution and within its community and the larger society. I suggest it be addressed more intensely and more seriously at this stage if the Higher Education Institution wishes to reap the benefits very soon.

Now let us see what are the elements that come under the THREE dimensions that I have already identified, under the three headings namely; skills & competencies, innovation and culture & community.

It is mandatory that one of the key functions of a University is to enhance the skills and competencies of the human resources that institution committed to develop. Here, the Higher Education Institution should address the

problems faced by the immediate community and conduct research to seek solutions such problems. Thus a regional University should take up vigorous research on the issues pertaining to improve the quality of life of the people. The findings from research should also be appropriately transmitted to the relevant people in order implement them in real life situations. This is a process of transfer of technology from the laboratory to the field. In the South East region, fishing, agriculture and home based industries are some of the key income generating areas for the people. Thus, the Higher Education Institutions should divert its resources to focus on studies related to the above areas.

Similarly, innovative attempts by the university personnel should be duly recognized and rewarded. In this context, I would like to draw your attention to the third dimension identified by Goddard in 2003 for regional development. Namely, the issue of *cultural and community development*

creating the milieu of social cohesion and sustainable development on which innovation depends.

It is one of the key factors that needs to be addressed by a University placed in a region where regional development becomes one of the prime functions if it were to survive. There are several major elements in this dimension. It addresses issues related to

- (a) Cultural development
- (b) Community development
- (c) Social cohesion, and
- (d) Innovation.

Thus in reviewing the next corporate plan of the University it is indeed appropriate that some of the issues are taken into serious consideration. At this juncture I also wish to state that the University Grants Commission has already finalized the revised corporate plan for 2008 - 2012 clearly focusing the action plan to 2008 to 2010. This exercise was done without spending any fancy payment to

any agency, but utilizing the expertise available within the University Grant Commission. I request all the Higher Education Institutions to prepare their Corporate Plans according to enable us to work in cohesion and in synchronization. In addition I also would like to announce that we have taken a policy decision to encourage all the Universities to commence their academic activities on a commonly identified week, that is the last week of August each year and arrange their programs accordingly. Most certainly the Higher Education Institutions will have their academic freedom to adjust their academic calendars within the year commencing from August each year. The crucial issue is the synchronized commencement of all the programmes at the same time to reduce several other practical problems encountered by all concerned due to this uncertainty created for the commencement of academic year.

Thank you.