

SOUTH EASTERN UNIVERSITY OF SRI LANKA

**CONVOCATION ADDRESS
19 JANUARY 2009**

**Let us Create a Dynamic Environment conducive for
Higher Education at the South Eastern University of
Sri Lanka**

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The South Eastern University of Sri Lanka (SEUSL) was established in the year 1995 as the tenth National University coming under the purview of the University Grants Commission. Its predecessor was the South Eastern University College of Sri Lanka (SEUCSL) which previously met 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. At the outset itself I wish to mention that it was the untiring efforts of late Honorable Minister MHM. Ashraff that has paved the way to establish this centre of higher learning in the South Eastern region of Sri Lanka. I am also happy to state at this juncture that I had the opportunity as a member as well as the Vice Chairman of the UGC even at that time, to participate at the deliberations in planning the establishment of this University. Thus, I am happy and thankful to the Vice Chancellor, the Senate and the Council of the University for having given me this opportunity to deliver the convocation address today.

Presently after having successfully steered through over two full decades, the University has achieved a significant progress in its academic activities and reached sufficient maturity to be recognized as a seat of excellence amongst other such Institutions in Sri Lanka. It is notable to mention that such developments had taken place amidst trying and challenging conditions existed within this region due to the ongoing conflict, which we earnestly believe would be settled soon. Thus I must congratulate and commend the Vice Chancellor and the academic, executive and non academic staff for having contributed for the gradual development of this center of higher learning in this region.



I note that presently the university has four Faculties with ten departments and two units in key disciplines such as Arts and Culture, Applied Sciences, Management and Commerce and Islamic Studies and Arabic Language. As at 2007, the University had 63 lecturers and 26 senior lecturers and about 1200 students.

Today some of the graduands are expected to be conferred the degrees in various fields. All of those who are expected to be conferred the degrees have enjoyed the benefits of a full fledged University amidst of course few shortcomings and inevitable constraints that they were compelled to experience. Thus, I commend the staff and students who had strived through difficulties and managed to sustain academic standards. In this context I also would like to emphasise in a recently established University, the role that needs to be played by the parents and the members of the community that immediately surrounds the environment of the University also is of immense value. Ultimately a University should serve the students, the community it is being situated, the region and the nation. Under the above circumstances, it is also inevitable that we should address issues related to international standards and accreditation benchmarks together with the mix of competencies that are nationally relevant.

In this context, the forces that determine the trends on higher education are increasingly strategic – for national and regional development, for finding solutions to some of today’s leading social, economic, health and environmental challenges and also, for achieving education for all. Hence, as a newly established higher education institution, the SEUSL has to adopt innovative strategies making use of the opportunities available in a dynamic approach within this competitive settings to create a dynamic environment conducive for Higher Education at the SEUSL. The new dynamics that could be identified broadly are categorized under the following headings: demand, diversification, networking, lifelong learning, ICTs and social responsibility.

DEMAND

We are aware that the demand for higher education in Sri Lanka is so vast and immense. The Gross Enrollment Ratio is around 11 %. It is believed that for an effective economic growth of a country the GER should at least be between 40 - 50 %. In this context it is appropriate to reflect the issues associated with the determination of a GER in the Sri Lankan context. We are experiencing an imbalanced regional development with unequal general and higher educational opportunities within the island.

This fact is further aggravated by the more than two decades old northeast crisis together with the resultant displaced communities. Under such circumstances finding equal higher educational opportunities to all within a short time span is an impossible task. One of the crucial factors responsible for the restricted undergraduate enrolment is the low popularity of the Universities situated in the North and East as well as the low demand for enrolment in the newly established universities. Thus it is the duty of such institutes to introduce innovative and student friendly approaches to attract more and more students. Such attempts also should incorporate issues related to student welfare and security. In addition, the regional Universities should develop their own strategies to attract students from all geographic locations and ethnic groups and retain them. The course structures introduced in such universities should meet the current needs of the industry and also to meet the job opportunities, especially paying attention to lifelong learning with core and optional competencies. In this respect I believe the South Eastern University has a tremendous potential which should be appropriately exploited to strengthen its student numbers. Such strategies should address issues related to marginalized groups, displaced students, encouraging student registrations from all communities and conducting courses in English medium to promote inter ethnic

interaction. However, all these ambitious plans would only materialize depending on the availability of adequate academic staff with relevant qualifications, experience, vision and commitment.

DIVERSIFICATION

The courses conducted have to be innovative to suite the current trends in the job market. Diversification is spawned by rising demand, globalization and new information technologies. Furthermore, diversification is expected to occur amidst the emergence of more complex, competitive systems, with a variety of institutions, providers and differentiated approaches. Cross-border provision is expanding rapidly. In this context, quality assurance is essential to protect students from fraudulent and low quality providers, many of which offer costly online courses. This is an area for global collaboration. Thus, an emerging university when attempts to diversify its courses should be able to withstand the challenges and threats posed by the existing HEIs and other cross border institutions. However, I am sure, with a proper leadership and appropriate vision along with a committed staff, changes could be definitely introduced to enable diversification of courses with a modular approach of the curricular structure.

NETWORKING IN RESEARCH AND INSTITUTIONAL COOPERATION

This is an essential element that could differentiate a University from that of a glorified secondary school. University is identified as a centre of excellence in certain domains and disciplines. Such an image only could be built up on the strength of its research capacity and knowledge generation base. The research carried out should be more relevant to the local and national needs rather than fully devoting to abstract research. In this context the inter-Institutional collaboration is highly desirable and beneficial to a developing University like the SEUSL. Perhaps it could initiate collaborative research with other Universities in certain selected areas of mutual benefit. Similarly other research Institutes and agencies could be tied up for support. Although very often we tend to establish link programmes with foreign agencies or Universities very rarely we tie up with our own local institutes or even the relevant Ministries or Government departments. There are many areas that could be explored with this kind of institutional linkage.

LIFELONG LEARNING

Our knowledge intensive societies call for opportunities to upgrade

skills and learn new ones. Higher education systems are being challenged to become more flexible in terms of

entry and exit, to recognize qualifications gained through work experience and to develop new programmes adapted to changing social and economic needs. This involves partnerships to forge closer links with the world of work and help to bridge the mismatch between supply and demand for higher-level skills. We see this in countries and regions such as Africa simultaneously characterized by low rates of higher education enrolment but also high rates of graduate unemployment. Thus, it is appropriate and desirable that SEUSL adopt an approach to promote the philosophy of life long learning in its academic programmes. It is a fact that the changing needs of the Industry and the available technologies demand multi skilling and to provide opportunities to acquire new skills and competencies. Such cycles may occur at every 5-8 years and it is advisable to prepare the students to be capable of facing such challenges. This only could be done by inculcating in the graduates the skills to learn new competencies and adapt to new demand driven environments.

INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES

A fifth dynamic at work relates to the impact of information and communication technology on all aspects of learning - distance learning, e-learning, and

the growth of open universities that are making higher education more accessible, especially for working adults. I would like to draw your attention to one example of how technology can facilitate access to knowledge: the open educational resources community, through which any number of courses could be made easily available in digital format. We all are aware that the DEMP programmes has already set up its NODES centres to enable Universities to utilize its facilities to conduct courses using the online format. This is a novel approach to experiment to conduct at least initially to try out on external degree programmes.



SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Higher education plays a strategic role in training teachers and planners, in conducting pedagogical research and developing curricula. More broadly, universities play an influential role in equipping graduates with the knowledge, skills and concern to address a range of social, economic and scientific issues. It is interesting to note that the United Nations is seeking to better connect with higher education institutions through its new Academic Impact programme. One of its aims is to promote their engagement in achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Governments today face tough policy choices. They are under enormous pressure in developing regions to expand all levels of the education system. The financial crisis and economic slowdown runs the risk of putting even more pressure on education systems, through stagnation or cutbacks in national spending and through lower levels of aid. It is more important than ever to repeat the salience of education for human development and prosperity. At the higher level, more innovative financing mechanisms will undoubtedly be required to broaden the funding base. The bottom line is that political commitment to education and global collaboration will be required to build more inclusive, flexible and high quality education systems at all levels.

The Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in a survey carried out in 1999 identified that the following as some attributes preferred by the business and industry from a graduate at an entry level of occupation;

- Essential computing, numeracy and communication skills, and general knowledge in world affairs and wide interests;
- Critical thinking ability combined with an open/positive/practical mindset;

- Willingness to learn from a wide cross section of people;
- Good inter-personal skills, ability to work with different people and in different teams;
- Ability to lead a team and achieve results within a given time frame, ability to prioritise and utilise time productively, and initiative and willingness to take risks, personal grooming and business etiquette.

In 2007 it was further revised in the following manner;

- Ability to communicate effectively including in English
- Good interpersonal skills/ability to work with different people and in different teams/ability to adapt to changing work environments;
- Ability to lead a team and achieve results in a short space of time;
- Ability to prioritise/organize time productively;
- Cultivate willingness to take risks;
- An open, positive and practical mindset;
- Willingness to learn from a wide cross section of people;
- Computer literacy and basic numerical skills;
- General knowledge (world affairs)

- Dress sense/ personal grooming /business etiquette
- Innovative thinking and
- Ethical conduct.

In a recent study it was identified that our country needs graduates who not only have ability to analyze and solve organizational problems, but also graduate with competencies to handle crisis situations and take leadership in such situations.

Finally, I would like to read the vision of the SEUSL as I read in the internet, it states that to produce Graduates who could fare well in the world of work to the extent of bringing reputations and glory to this University for its excellent service in the educational fields and of contributing best to promote peace and harmony in the society nationally and internationally and to see the stake holders appreciate and support the University in its activities.

The above vision statement amply summarizes my address in one paragraph; it is also the essence of the message that should be carried by the graduates who are exiting from this University to face the future. May Almighty Allah bless you all with good health and strength to carry forward the mission of this University in the future.