

# **Attributes of University Teachers and Students of Sri Lanka**

*Prof. Gamini Samaranayake,  
Dept. of Political Science,  
University of Peradeniya,  
Peradeniya*

The Chancellor Prof. Achi Mohamed Ishaq, the Vice Chancellor Dr. Ismail, Deans of Faculties, Members of the Council, Professors, Heads of Departments and Members of the Academic Staff, the Registrar and Bursar and Members of the Administrative Staff, Parents and Graduants, well wishers and Ladies and gentleman,

It is a privilege and an honour to be invited to deliver the Key Note address at the Convocation for External Degrees of the South Eastern University of Sri Lanka. Therefore, I would like to thank Dr. Ismail, the Vice Chancellor and the organizing committee for their kind invitation.

The word university has a specific meaning, which indicates its functions and objectives. The word university is derived from the Latin term Universitas Magistrorum et Scholarium broadly meaning community of teachers and scholars. A University is not just a collection of buildings but is a community or society of intellectuals. From the inception of the university in the medieval period, it has

been a symbol of human integrity, a trustee for civilization and a symbol of an intellectual community.

However, the objectives of universities differ from country to country. In the United Kingdom universities were formed to serve the profession with humanistic aspirations, beginning with the clergy, and then developing to include Law and Medicine. In Germany, on the other hand, they were influenced heavily by the enlightenment and development of the mind, making research the main goal. The United States of America established universities for national development and security as well as scientific research for the advancement of medicine, science and technology to support industry and manufacturing. In the current context globalization and internationalization of higher education, has made it imperative for universities to depend on and expand Information Communication and Technology (ICT), the use of English as a medium of instruction, expand the involvement of the private sector in higher education, and follow the technical and operation guidance provided by Donor and other multilateral and bilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO) which operates via General Agreements on Trade and Services (GATS). This has changed the objectives of university education drastically.

Therefore in today's context the university is called upon to play multiple roles which range from discovery and dissemination of knowledge to serving society.

National security has also become a key function of the universities of the United States of America. Thus, Higher Education particularly university education is a continuous process of imparting knowledge, developing skills, inculcating values and promoting the overall personality of human beings. Imparting quality education is greatly influenced by different factors such as the curriculum, the quality and standards of the teachers, and library services, the teaching methods, the examination system, the evaluation mechanism and infrastructure. Of these components, the roles of the teacher assume a vital role in ensuring the quality of education.

The word convocation originally was referred specifically to the entirety of the alumni of a Higher Education Institution, which usually plays the role of a representative body of such an institute in many of its official ceremonies and functions. In contrast, in the recent past many Higher Educational Institutes throughout the world identified the convocation as the university graduation ceremony to award degrees to students and honorary graduands. In some Institutions it was considered as the ceremony representing the registration of students to Higher Educational Institutes. In the Sri Lankan tradition the convocation at a Higher Educational Institutes means the conferment of degrees or diploma to graduands or other dignitaries or those who have performed some service of value and recognition. In other

words the convocation truly displays the output of such an institute.

Furthermore, the convocation is a ceremony at which the achievement of a student will be officially recognized by conferring a degree or diploma after having satisfactorily and successfully completed the prescribed programme of study having demonstrated the expected levels of competency. Thus, at a convocation, which means literally in the Sri Lankan context an annual meeting or gathering of all the relevant academics and officials together with other selected stakeholders, is the highest academic activity concluding the period of registration of a student either at the undergraduate or post graduate level.

In this context, I would like to draw the attention of the academics and the students who are completing their studies to a very important aspect of education. That is the continuity of the learning process and the utilization of what the students have acquired for the benefit of the country at large and the service that could be provided to the society specifically in the area of study undertaken by the students. In this respect, a graduate should consider the milestone of the awarding of a degree as the beginning of his or her academic career in terms of service to society and to the country.

We are aware that university education in Sri Lanka commenced in 1942 as the University of Ceylon based on

the ox-bridge model to produce English speaking graduates who were required for the public sector as professionals namely Doctors, Engineers, and as administrators. The increase of the population, urbanization, development of the primary and secondary education, the expansion of health services all contributed to the higher aspirations for higher education and white collar and blue collar employment. The trends are very similar to that of a developed country mainly due to the improved quality of life in terms of access to health and education.

As a result, we currently have 14 traditional or conventional universities, three campuses, one Open University with 26 study centers, and 16 undergraduate and post graduate institutes under the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC). Furthermore, there are 9 Degree Awarding Institutes providing higher education in the country. Almost, 80,000 internal students and close upon 150,000 external students are studying at our universities. Besides, there are well over 60 cross border or transnational institutes offering higher education in the form of certificate programme,s diplomas and graduate programme. It is estimated that nearly 20,000 students seek higher education out of the country in Asia, in Europe, in Australia and in the United States.

One of the main criticisms aimed at university education by some critics including the Central Bank Report of Sri Lanka for 2008 is that higher education is of

“low quality and low standards and that 32 percent of the students admitted to national universities study social sciences and humanities and a substantial proportion of these graduates find it difficult to obtain productive employment.” The same report concludes that “the country has a supply driven education system with little relevance to labour market conditions and to entrepreneurial culture.” Currently, the public sector continues to absorb a large number of our graduates especially from the social sciences and the humanities. As an academic for over 35 years as well as a former chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC), I have my own interpretations of the current trends in university education and graduate employability in the country.

The most acceptable definition of employability and the best I could find states that “ Employability is a set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.” Employability thus defined as a wider interpretation and has connotations especially for a developing country like Sri Lanka grappling with issues of political violence, poverty, and natural and man made disasters. A study conducted by the Council for Industry and Higher Education in the United Kingdom (UK) in 2008 found that employers rate communication skills,

interpersonal skills, integrity and intellectual ability over literacy and numeracy.

The survey conducted by the Chamber of Commerce in Sri Lanka in 1999 has mentioned that the following attributes are expected by the private sector employers from the graduates in addition to their academic qualifications. They are as follows: effective communication skills including global languages such as French, Spanish and English with mandarin emerging as a language of commerce and diplomacy, good inter-personal relationships, ability to lead and work in teams and result oriented performance management, the ability to prioritize ones own work and many other skills. The survey confirms that employers prefer social skills and personality type as being more important than the degree qualifications to meet the demands of a market driven economy. This also infers that career advisory services needs to be updated and relevant.

I was surprised to learn that none of the donors, policy makers and planners had conducted a comprehensive study of the needs of employers as done in the UK. The universities in the UK are also striving to address issues of employability as evidenced in their websites such as the university of Hull and Wolverhampton and the upgraded polytechnics are diversifying their courses to make them relevant not only to their domestic labour markets but that of other

countries. That is why we find that professionals and skilled workers in banking, construction, in advertizing and even in the fine arts are now working in Singapore, Hong, Kong, Malaysia Thailand Korea and other countries. They speak the local languages and are able to merge with the local culture and work environment. This is the gap that we in Sri Lanka need to fill to fully understand the employability of our graduates and the mismatch between the requirements of the employers and the higher education system. Do we prepare our graduates to work even in South Asia and how many of us learn even Tamil, Hindhi, and Urdhu.

However, it is my contention that we need to consider some critical factors that are confined to our education system as well as our country context. One of the main factors is that the universities cannot impart critical skills such as problem solving, analytical thinking and interpersonal skills required for employability within the three or four years that they spend at the university. Students needs to acquire these skills through a good Early Childhood Care and Development Programme that is regulated has quality standards for reference and a sound system of assessment. Once again Singapore offers a good example where children are taught Mandarin, English and Hindhi or Urdhu in the preschool years so that they learn to live and work in a multi cultural environment and compete in the international labour market. Such a far sighted preschool education should be followed by a skill based



primary and secondary education that is not dependent on rote learning. Why is it that we have a higher percentage of girls than boys completing secondary education and in some faculties in our universities? That is because the boys are bored by the rote learning system and tend to drop out of education or seek other education courses that are more skill based.

The second factor derives from our country context. What is the reality in our universities? Any form of change is resisted with political overtones and the policy makers and administrators are challenged every step of the way in bringing about changes in the system. The subculture is manifest in the high degree of politicization in the universities which are currently the base for insurrectionary politics as exemplified by the violence in universities whether it is political factionalism or violent ragging. This subculture of violence resists any form of change and the silent majority is penalized by a violent few. I am glad to say that the South Eastern University has demonstrated a less violent culture maybe due to its strong discipline that is derived from the cultural background of the students. This is one of the reasons that your university has a high potential of overtaking some of the more established universities.

However, generally the lack of quality in education and limitations in access has resulted in the outmigration of young people in search of education. Annually, more than 20,000 students are admitted to our universities and higher

education institution through a fiercely competitive admission system. However, as education is provided free of charge by the state they have become large public institutions that are dependent on state funding. Our universities have marginal independent resource mobilization. The universities that do generate self funding do not manage these resources effectively and efficiently to improve the quality of infrastructure and services provided.

Apart from the effective management and innovative approaches the university teachers play a vital role in the development of university education in any given country.

An University teacher is like no other profession. A teacher has many responsibilities which include communication, self discipline and the discipline of others, a conveyer of information, an evaluator, a counselor, a decision-maker, a role model and a surrogate parents. Each of these roles requires practice and skills. They should not only have a thorough knowledge of their subject enhanced through continued research, teaching and training but they should also be aware of the big picture including a some understanding of each and every student and his or her potential. It is said “each teacher must learn almost everyday something new, teach something new (and even if he has to teach old topics, to teach them in a new way) and also to create something new in the form of research in

teaching and also research in his subject area.” (J.N.Kapur, 1997)

*Touching on something even more close to us and that is the level of commitment of teachers which includes his or her right for activism. It is said that “professional growth does not mean the growth of unhealthy trade unionist. A teacher has to fight for his rights and for his dignity, but he has not to do so at the cost of his students and his contribution to education and research.’*

*The role of the teacher takes us undoubtedly to the realm of the role of the student. The role of students is vital for the quality of university education in any country. The readiness of the student to learn is as important as the readiness to teach. In such a context, what is the role of the university student? Primarily, there should be a mechanism to absorb students into a system of higher education where self-learning is critical compared to the rote learning in schools. They have to be motivated to develop their inter-personal skills and talents to meet the demands of the labour market and the world of work in general.*

*The South Eastern University is also a relatively new and up and coming university in Sri Lanka. It was established on the 1<sup>st</sup> of August 1995 under the provision of the Universities Act No 16 of 1978. By setting up this university it was envisaged to function as a national centre*

of higher learning to serve the needs of the people of the South East with its broader objective of contributing to regional and national development. The value and the capacity of the university have increased with the establishment of the Faculty of Engineering. Thereby, the university could be producing employable graduates for the global and regional labour markets but there is much to be done in producing a graduate that is truly global. Therefore, while appreciating the contribution of the Chancellor, the Vice Chancellor, the academics and administrative staff, and the members of governing board for their commitment for the development of university education in the country I would strongly urge them to face the challenges of the future.

I wish to take this opportunity to congratulate those who receive their degrees today. Thank you very much.