

Reorienting undergraduate education in Sri Lanka towards sustainable development

by

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Abstract

The education system in Sri Lanka has a documented history of about 2300 years. The present university system has roots extending back to 1870s. At present there are 15 universities in Sri Lanka including the Open University. The undergraduate student population of the conventional universities at present is about 66,500. In 2006, the recurrent and capital expenditure per student are US\$ 1369 and US\$ 43 respectively. The total amount of funds allocated for the universities by the government in 2006 is around US\$ 94 million. The university education up to the first degree is free in Sri Lanka.

Some action taken recently by the university system in Sri Lanka has contributed significantly in reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development. These include the institutional reviews, subject reviews, bench marking, development of qualification framework and codes of practice, career guidance, staff development, introduction of new curricula and revision of existing curricula, skills development, and improving social harmony, and open and distance learning.

The recently introduced quality assurance programme and the World Bank funded Improvement of Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education project of the Ministry of Education have also contributed for reorienting undergraduate education in Sri Lanka towards sustainable development.

Introduction

The education in Sri Lanka has a documented history which goes back to the third century B.C. Archaeological evidence in the former capital city of Sri Lanka, Anuradhapura, shows that there were three main schools of higher education from 3rd century B.C to 1st century A.D. which had imparted knowledge in variety of fields specially associated with Buddhism and Languages. These were *Mahavihara*, founded in 3rd century B.C., the *Abhayagiri-Mahavihara* founded 1st century B.C and *Jethavana-Mahavihara* founded in 1st century A.D. (Mendis *et al.* 2006). All these were Buddhist monastic colleges of higher learning.

The present University system of Sri Lanka has roots extending back to 1870s. In the latter part of the 19th century, several institutes of higher learning had been established. These include the Medical College established in 1869-1870, Vidyodaya monastic college of higher learning established in 1870 which is the predecessor of the present University of Sri Jayawardenapura, the Vidyalankara monastic college of higher learning established in 1875 which is the predecessor of the present University of Kelaniya and the Law College established in 1874 (Mendis *et al.* 2006).

Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world where university education is free. In addition to free education, the students are provided with highly subsidized meals and residential facilities. The students from low income families are given bursaries or scholarships also by the Government.

As in most other countries, there is a high demand for undergraduate education in Sri Lanka. The Government over the past years has shown its will and commitment to expand and improve the quality of undergraduate education in Sri Lanka. (MoE 2005).

At present there are 15 Universities in Sri Lanka including the Open University. The undergraduate student population in the Universities excluding the Open University at present is 66,500. The number enrolled at the Open University is around 25,500 (Mendis *et al.* 2006). In the 14 conventional universities, the recurrent expenditure per student in 2006 is estimated to be Rs. 136,900 (approximately US \$ 1369) while the capital expenditure per student in 2006 is estimated to be Rs 4232 (approximately US\$ 42). The total amount allocated for higher education by the Government in 2006 is Rs 10,830 million, of which about 72% is allocated for recurrent expenditure. The allocation for higher education as a percentage of total expenditure of the Government is only 1.5%.

In 1998, university education reforms were introduced with the objectives of increasing the access to universities and increasing the productivity of undergraduate education. Much emphasis was paid to expand the university education, diversification of undergraduate courses, revision of curricula to suit the needs of the country, enhancing employability, providing career guidance, strengthening linkages with the industry, staff development and student issues. These reforms also contributed for reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development.

Quality assurance of undergraduate education

The quality assurance programme introduced in 2001 also contributes significantly towards reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development. The quality in higher education has been identified as a multi-dimensional concept which embraces teaching, academic programmes, research, scholarships, staff, students, services provided to the community and the academic environment as a whole.

The quality assurance programmes in the Sri Lankan Universities were started by the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors (CVCD) in 2002. In 2004, the Standing Committee on Quality Assurance and Accreditation was established at the University Grants Commission (UGC). In 2005, Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of the UGC was established. The mission of the QAAC is to ensure quality, continuous development and efficient performance of Sri Lankan higher education institutions and to gain the confidence of the community in their graduates in accordance with internationally recognized evaluation mechanisms (www.qaacouncil.lk, 2006).

The components of the quality assurance system in Sri Lanka include, institutional, reviews, subject reviews, subject benchmarking, credit and qualification framework and codes of practice.

The institutional reviews analyses and tests the effectiveness of the institutions' processes for managing and assuring the quality of academic activities over time. The aspects considered in institutional reviews in Sri Lanka are university goals and corporate planning, financial resources and their management, quality management and administration, university-industry links and university-community links, learning recourses and student support, research and external degree programmes (CVCD/UGC 2002). Evaluating these

aspects will encourage the university to maintain them at a satisfactory level, which will contribute to sustainable development through the assurance of quality.

In the subject reviews, the quality of education within a department of study is evaluated. It focuses on the quality of student achievements and learning environment. The aspects considered in the subject reviews are curriculum design, content and review; teaching, learning and assessment methods; quality of students, students' progress and achievement; use of students' feedback, postgraduate studies; skills development; and academic guidance and counseling (CVCD/UGC 2002). Continuous monitoring through subject reviews will contribute to enhance the quality of education offered by the departments of study in the higher educational institutes, which will ultimately contribute towards sustainable development.

Subject benchmarking is aimed at improving and regulating the academic standards of a particular discipline. The subject benchmark statements are being developed for this purpose. These provide reference points for key features of a programme, intended learning outcomes and the standards required. Benchmarking subjects ensures the quality of an academic discipline, and this will also contribute to the sustainable development.

Sri Lankan credit and qualification framework is aimed at providing a uniform structure for the diplomas, degrees and higher degrees among the higher educational institutes. This identifies credit measures that indicate the levels and volumes of learning for each type of qualification. Such a framework, will also contribute to the sustainable development by ensuring the quality of the programmes offered by the universities.

Until recently there were no codes of practice in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Recently the Quality Assurance programme in Sri Lanka has developed codes of practice in six areas. These areas are assessment of students; career guidance; external assessors; postgraduate programmes; student support and guidance, and programme approval, monitoring and review (QAAC 2005). These codes of practice will also ensure the quality of the programmes offered by the universities which will eventually contribute for sustainable development.

In order to ensure greater contribution towards sustainable development by reorienting undergraduate education through an effective quality assurance programme, internal quality assurance units have been established in all universities in Sri Lanka. The role of these units is to ensure that the quality assurance programmes within the universities are successfully carried out.

Reorienting undergraduate curricula for sustainable development

The University system in Sri Lanka has now embraced interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches in their undergraduate curricula. With the introduction of the modular system in mid 1990s, the students were provided with greater flexibility in selecting their courses. They can now select course units of their choice in various disciplines. For example, in the Faculties of Science, the biological science students can select courses from the physical science stream and vice versa. Further, the students from the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences can select courses from the Faculties of Science and

Management and vice-versa. This will help the graduates to get a very broad training which will ultimately contribute towards the sustainable development.

Recently, many new courses and degree programmes have been introduced in the university system of Sri Lanka. These include the degree programmes in environmental conservation and management, transport and logistics management, molecular biology and biochemistry, industrial statistics and mathematical finance, statistics and operations research, computation and management, marine science and fisheries biology, nursing, pharmacy, medical laboratory science, radiography, physiotherapy, entrepreneurship and management studies, and animal science and export agriculture. These new degree programmes help to increase the relevance of undergraduate programmes for national development and will produce the graduates who have a high demand in the national context. The knowledge in these fields will be useful for sustainable development of the country. Therefore, introduction of these new degree programmes will also contribute significantly towards sustainable development of Sri Lanka.

In addition, curricula are frequently revised considering the needs of the country. This has also been possible due to the course unit system that is in operation. New course units are frequently being added and the course contents are revised regularly. These are done in consultation of various stakeholders including experts in the field, potential employers and alumni. These revisions will also contribute for the sustainable development of the country.

Strengthening human resources

Strengthening of human resources is also a vital factor that should be considered when reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development. Several activities have been taken to strengthen the human resources in the university sector in Sri Lanka.

In most universities, staff development units have been established. These units conduct courses for the academic staff to strengthen their capacities in all aspects required for a university teacher. These include areas such as teaching methods, assessment techniques, communication skills, research, counseling and academic guidance. These units are headed by a Director. The University Grants Commission has also set up a Standing Committee on Staff Development where all Directors of the staff development units are the members.

For sustainable development, it is necessary to have a sufficient number of staff members for teaching, administration and non academic activities. However, from time to time, the recruitment of non-academic grades are stopped by the authorities. Further, the granting approval for cadre by the General Treasury is also delayed. However, the cadre required for the new degree programmes which will be commenced from 2006 were approved without delay. The delays in recruiting sufficient numbers of staff, both academic and non-academic, have a negative impact on reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development.

Skills development for sustainable development

When reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development, another aspect that has to be considered is skills development of the students. When designing curricula, much emphasis is made on the development of skills of the students. These include both subject specific skills and interpersonal skills. In the subject reviews of the quality assurance programme, skills development is one of the aspects reviewed.

Recently, the universities had paid much attention for improving the English language skills and ICT skills of the students. The World Bank funded Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education project (IRQUE Project) of the Ministry of Education, which had provided US\$ 40 million as a credit has allocated a reasonable amount of funds for improving English language and ICT skills among the undergraduates.

Social and intercultural harmony

Social and intercultural harmony within the universities is another aspect that is given much emphasis in the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Many activities are carried out all universities to enhance social and intercultural harmony within universities. The IRQUE project has also allocated some funds for such activities. The attitudes developed in the university are expected to contribute for the enhancement of social and intercultural harmony which is highly important for the sustainability of the development of a multicultural, multi-ethnic country like Sri Lanka.

In some universities, degree programmes in conflict resolution are also introduced. These will also help to enhance social and intercultural harmony.

University-Industry links

When reorienting undergraduate education towards sustainable development, university - industry links will also have a significant role to play. These links will help to re-orient undergraduate curricula to cater for the needs of the industry and also help the industry to select the students with specific skills that suit their requirements. In the universities of Sri Lanka, when revising curricula, the views of the industry are sought and the courses are designed to suit the industry. Some examples include the B.Sc degree programme in management information technology at the University of Kelaniya, B.Sc special degree programme in fisheries and aquaculture at the University of Rajarata and the B.Sc degree programme in fisheries and ocean resources at the University of Ruhuna.

Industrial training has now become an important component in undergraduate curricula in most universities especially in the Faculties of Science, Commerce, Management, Agriculture and Engineering. Here, the undergraduates are assigned to an industry for 2-4 weeks and are required to get some training on various aspects of that industry. This will help the undergraduates to learn about what that industry is doing and most of the time after graduation these students get employment at the industry where they got this training. However, at present in some degree programmes, especially in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, such training is not incorporated into the curricula. These are the faculties with the highest number of students. Action has to be taken to give these students also some sort of industrial training. However, still such provisions are not available in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lanka.

Research for sustainable development

Research in the university system is also an important factor for sustainable development. However, the research findings of the academic staff should be used for undergraduate teaching in order to orient undergraduate education towards sustainable development. Further, the students' projects can also be on an area associated with sustainable development. This happens to some extent in the universities of Sri Lanka, especially in science and science based faculties. However, such activities are rare in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences.

Open and Distance Learning

Providing university education to larger numbers will also contribute for sustainable development as the society will become more knowledgeable. However, due to limited facilities only a small number is admitted to the Universities. Of about 35,000 students who apply to Sri Lankan universities every year, only about 17,000 are admitted. One way of catering for this high demand is open and distance learning. In Sri Lanka, the Open University provides such education. The conventional universities are also contributing for this by conducting external degree examinations. However, without confining to conducting only the examinations, some of the conventional universities are providing more services to their off-campus students. In order to facilitate this, the conventional universities are in the process of establishing Centres for Open and Distance Learning. The University of Kelaniya has already started such a centre and in 2006, the enrollment for the 1st year of the external Bachelor's degree programmes is around 10,000, compared to 2000 internal students. Therefore, such centres will significantly contribute to make the society more knowledgeable, which will eventually lead for the sustainability of the development.

Through the Centres for Open and Distance Learning, it is possible to cater for life-long learning through the courses designed for working adults. At present, the Open University of Sri Lanka and the Institute of Workers' Education of the University of Colombo cater for this need. The provision of such facilities could be enhanced through the Centres for Open and Distance Learning. Knowledgeable adults will also be a contributing factor for sustainable development.

Conclusion

The university reforms that were introduced in the recent past have contributed significantly towards reorienting undergraduate education in Sri Lanka towards sustainable development. However, limited funding for undergraduate education has hindered these reorienting programmes. The higher education sector has to compete with many other sectors such as health, basic education, poverty alleviation, infrastructure development, security and defense to get funding. Some donor funded projects such as the IRQUE project funded by the World Bank has helped to some extent in orienting undergraduate programmes towards sustainable development.

However, in the Faculties of Humanities and Social Sciences, such reorienting of undergraduate education towards sustainable development has not taken place or has taken place to a very little extent although the larger % of undergraduates represents these faculties.

Although undergraduate degree programmes specially in the science based faculties are reoriented towards sustainable development, most of the graduates leave Sri Lanka looking for greener pastures in the developed countries in the western world. Therefore, there is no opportunity to use their knowledge and skills for sustainable development of the motherland. However, training provided for them has become useful in the global perspectives.

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