

කල‍්‍යාණ දීපනී

ශාස්ත්‍රීය සංග්‍රහය

කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයේ ස්වර්ණ ජයන්තිය

(1959 - 2009)

නිමිත්තෙන්

කැලණිය විශ්වවිද්‍යාලයේ ආදිවිද්‍යාර්ථීන්ගේ සංසඳය

මගින් ප්‍රකාශයට පත් කරන ලදී.

KALYANA DEEPANIE

(A Collection of Articles)

Published by

The Alumni Association of University of Kelaniya

to Commemorate the

Golden Jubilee

(1959 - 2009)

of

The University of Kelaniya

Borderless Education: Challenges and Opportunities For Sri Lankan Universities

**Prof. M.J.S Wijeyaratne
Senior Professor of Zoology and Former
Vice Chancellor of
University of Kelaniya.**

Abstract

The demand for higher education is continuously increasing in Sri Lanka. Of around 120,000 students who qualify for higher education every year, only about 20,000 are selected to the 14 state universities other than the Open University. The education at these 14 state universities is free and in addition, around 75% of the students get a monthly stipend by way of a scholarship or bursary. Therefore, the demand for state universities is extremely high.

Around 5,000 students register annually at the Open University of Sri Lanka and another 40,000 register for open and distance learning courses at the conventional universities. Of the balance number, some go abroad for their higher studies and most follow the courses at private Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs). Some of the private HEIs conduct classes for the examinations of overseas professional institutions and students sit for examinations on-line. Some others prepare students for the examinations of foreign universities that are conducted in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, due to extremely limited number of places available in the state universities and large number of students who qualify for

university education, there is a high potential for borderless education in Sri Lanka, which has been exploited by many private HEIs.

These private HEIs are registered under the Registrar of Companies or Board of Investment (BOI). However, majority of them have not obtained the approval of the UGC. Some of the private HEIs, which have affiliations with foreign universities, do not have even basic physical and human resources, and the poor quality of education provided results in many students failing examinations and abandoning the course after spending large amounts of money. In addition, some of these private HEIs, which claim affiliation to foreign universities, are found to be bogus institutions.

However, the private HEIs which have received the approval of the UGC and BOI offer degrees from prestigious foreign universities and their graduates are readily acceptable in the employment market. They have an advantage over most of the graduates of state universities due to their fluency in English, better IT knowledge and communication skills.

Some of the Sri Lankan universities are also engaged in borderless education through private HEIs in some Asian countries. However, this is mainly for subjects such as Buddhist Studies.

Key words: Sri Lanka, Borderless Education, Buddhist studies, private HEIs

Introduction

In Sri Lanka, there are 15 universities under the University Grants Commission (UGC), two universities which come directly under the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) and the Defense University under the Ministry of Defense. The 15 universities which come under the UGC include 14 conventional universities and the Open University. Sri Lanka is one of the few countries in the world, which provides university education free of charge. In addition to free education, about 75% of the students enrolled in state universities are provided with a monthly stipend through scholarships or bursaries.

In addition to above universities, there are 74 private Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) throughout the country. Of these, five have been recognized by the UGC and granted the degree awarding status (Rajapakse 2008). These five HEIs, although not named as Universities, are authorized to award degrees in some identified fields. All these private HEIs are registered under the Registrar of Companies or the Board of Investment. The Private HEIs, which do not have the degree awarding status, are franchised institutes or external campuses of foreign universities or professional institutions. They train students for the examinations of these universities or professional institutions and the degree/professional qualification is awarded by the respective foreign university/professional institution. However, majority of these private HEIs are not approved by the UGC. Some of these private HEIs, which conduct classes for the examinations of foreign universities, do not have even basic physical and human resources. The poor quality of education provided by them results in many students failing the examinations and abandoning the courses after

spending large amount of money and wasting time. In addition, some of the private HEIs, which are operating in Sri Lanka are found to be bogus institutions (Peiris and Ratnasekera 2007).

In addition to these private HEIs that train students for the examinations of foreign universities/institutions, there is another group of private HEIs which train students for the external degree examinations of local universities. However, most of them are not registered under any authority. As such, there are no statistics on the exact number of such institutions.

The Demand for Higher Education

Every year, about 120,000 students pass the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination, which is also the university entrance examination. However, due to limited number of places available, only about 20,000 students are admitted to the conventional universities which are under the UGC. Of the remaining number, about 5,000 register at the Open University and about 40,000 register at the conventional universities to follow the degree courses through open and distance learning mode. Of the balance, few get employed, few go abroad and many follow professional courses or degree courses of foreign universities offered through private HEIs. As such, there is a high demand for professional courses and degree courses offered at the private HEIs.

The selection procedure to the conventional universities is as such that for courses other than Arts and Indigenous Medicine, students are not selected purely on merit; only 40% are selected on merit, 55%

are selected based on the population of each administrative district and 5% are selected from the administrative districts which are considered to be educationally disadvantaged districts. Of the total number of 25 administrative districts in Sri Lanka, 16 are considered to be educationally disadvantaged districts (UGC 2007). Therefore, many students who have scored less marks at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination than that of some of the students in the districts which are considered to be educationally advantaged districts, get admitted to the 14 national universities for science based courses such as Medicine, Engineering, Information Technology, Computer Science, Biological Science, Physical Science and Environmental Science as well as for Management courses. Further, the students from so called educationally disadvantaged districts, who have scored low marks get selected to more prestigious courses while those who scored higher marks than those students, get selected to not so prestigious courses. This is clearly evident from the data given in Table 1. The students who have got selected for Medicine from the Nuwara Eliya District, which is considered to be an educationally disadvantaged district, have got less marks than those who have got selected for Nursing from the Colombo District, which is considered to be an educationally advantaged district. This results in a group of doctors, who had poor results at the GCE (Advance Level) Examination than that of the nurses. This system of University admission based on educationally disadvantaged districts was introduced in 1974 and even after 35 years, it is in operation although there are many educationally disadvantaged schools in the districts which are considered to be educationally advantaged. Further, many students of so called educationally disadvantaged districts come to city centers to attend private tuition

classes, which is another big industry in Sri Lanka today. However, still this system introduced in 1974 prevails, resulting in non admittance of many students who have faired better at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination than some students who get admitted to the 14 conventional national universities of the UGC. These students who do not get admitted to the 14 national universities seek alternative sources of higher education. Therefore, some of the students who go abroad and/or follow professional/degree courses at the private HEIs are those who have faired better at the G.C.E. (Advanced Level) examination than some of the students who have got admitted to national universities. As such, the demand for courses at private HEIs is extremely high in Sri Lanka.

Some parents, even their children get selected to national universities, are reluctant to send them to those universities due to many reasons. Some parents do not send their children to the universities located in provincial areas, instead they admit them to private HEIs. Another reason for not sending children to state universities is the ragging where the new students are subjected to mental and physical harassment by senior students. Although this is prohibited by law, at some universities, such mental and physical harassments still take place. Therefore, some of the more affluent parents send their children to private HEIs where such mental and physical harassment is not in existence. Another reason for the reluctance of sending children to state universities is the frequent closure of those due to student protests, riots and clashes. Sometimes, two student fractions with opposite political ideologies fight with each other resulting in the closure of universities. Sometimes, the students protest against the

administration, which also results in the closure of universities. Therefore, it is very rarely that the students in state universities complete their study programmes within the stipulated time. However, in private HEIs, such protests, riots and clashes do not take place and students graduate within the stipulated time period. Therefore, some of the affluent parents prefer to send their children to private HEIs rather than sending them to state universities.

Due to this multitude of factors, there is a high demand for higher education provided by private HEIs which offer professional courses and degree courses of foreign universities.

Challenges for Sri Lankan Universities

One of the main challenges faced by Sri Lankan universities due to borderless education is retaining of qualified staff. The qualified and talented staff members are attracted by the private HEIs that conduct classes for the degrees of foreign universities offering them better remuneration. This happens especially in the fields of Information Technology and Computer Science.

In addition to retaining qualified staff, it has also become difficult to recruit young graduates who have fared well at the degree examinations to the academic staff because they are also attracted by these HEIs for better remuneration.

Other challenges faced by the Sri Lankan universities are to keep the curricula updated to be in par with those of the HEIs that train students for the degrees of foreign universities and to produce graduates who can compete in the employment market with the graduates of these

private HEIs. At present, most of the state universities are updating their curricula regularly to keep up with the modern trends and are also taking action to enhance the subject specific skills and soft skills of the undergraduates. This has been encouraged by the external quality assessments of academic programmes carried out in Sri Lankan universities at present. In the external quality assessments, special attention is paid to curriculum design, content, and revision, and skills development. When assessing curriculum content and revision, attention is paid to find out whether the curricula are designed to incorporate the recent developments in the subject, whether contents are of sufficient depth and breath and whether regular revisions are carried out considering the inputs from all stakeholders including alumni, potential employers, and experts in the field. In this way, local universities have taken action to face the challenge of updating curricula.

Skills development is another aspect which is evaluated in external quality assessments. The skills include not only the subject specific skills but also the communication skills, IT skills and soft skills. State universities in Sri Lanka are paying much attention to develop English communication skills and IT skills among their undergraduates. Special English and IT classes are conducted during the orientation period of new entrants. In addition, English and IT courses are included in the curricula of degree programmes. Some universities have made it compulsory to pass English courses in order to graduate.

Much attention is also paid to develop soft skills among the undergraduates. Many workshops are conducted with the participation of potential employers from the public and private sectors to develop

soft skills. These are generally organized by the Career Guidance Units which have been established in almost all state universities. In addition, the academic departments encourage co-curricular and extra-curricular activities as these also help to develop soft skills among undergraduates.

With the paying of much attention to develop the skills expected by the potential employers, the universities in Sri Lanka have addressed the challenge of enhancing employability of their graduates.

However, even though the Universities have taken action to update curricula and develop life skills among the undergraduates, frequent clashes among the student groups with opposite political ideologies, which are highlighted in mass media tarnish the names of state universities which will ultimately affect academic activities as well as the employability of their graduates. In addition to these clashes, there are frequent protests on government policies and also protests requesting the enhancement of facilities. If the protests and clashes are uncontrollable, the authorities close the universities which results in disruption of academic activities and prolongation of the academic year. These student protests are spearheaded by a minute group of students who are mostly backed by some political parties of the country.

Therefore, another challenge for state universities is to minimize if not to eradicate these student clashes, which reduce the employment prospects of the graduates as well as tarnish the names of the state universities. Many actions have been taken by the state universities to reduce these clashes. These include educating the students on the

adverse impacts of these activities, making a public outcry against these uncivilized actions, liaising with parents, taking legal action against the students who are responsible to those clashes etc. However, since the student activists are backed by outside political forces, the efforts taken by the university authorities sometimes become in vein.

Opportunities for borderless education

Since there is a large number of students who cannot get into a national university although they fulfill basic entry criteria, there are vast opportunities for Sri Lankan universities to cater for these students through the open and distance modes of learning. Many of the major universities in Sri Lanka, other than the Open University, have already started such courses, which have a high demand. These include the Bachelors degree programmes in the fields of Arts, Humanities, Social Sciences, Commerce, Science, Information Technology and Management. There is a higher demand for such courses offered through conventional universities than those offered by the Open University. Therefore, there is a high opportunity for Sri Lankan conventional universities to extend the education beyond their physical boundaries.

In addition to offering such open and distance learning courses within the country, there is a potential to offer such courses outside the country too. This exists specially for some subjects such as Buddhist Philosophy, Buddhist Culture, and Pali, which have a considerable demand in some Southeast Asian Countries.

Conclusion

Due to high demand for higher education and limited number of vacancies available in the state universities, there is a high potential for borderless education in Sri Lanka which is exploited by private HEIs offering courses of foreign universities. As a result, the state universities have to face many challenges including retention of qualified teachers, attraction of good students and production of competitive graduates. Frequent clashes among student groups having opposite political ideologies, backed by the political forces outside the universities had sometimes adversely affected the employability of graduates of state universities in the private sector, resulting in better employment prospects for graduates produced by private HEIs through borderless education. Conventional state universities also have a high potential for borderless education through open and distance mode of learning within Sri Lanka as well as in the Southeast Asian region.

Table 1: Cut-off Z scores for the Colombo district, which is considered to be an educationally advantaged district and the Nuwara Eliya district, which is considered to be an educationally disadvantaged district for some selected courses in 2007 (Source: UGC 2008).

References

- Peiris, C.N. and Ratnasekera, J.L. 2007. Students taken for a ride: Sri Lankan example. Proceedings of the 3rd APQN Conference, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
- Rajapakse, R. 2008. Role of the UGC in improving higher education in Sri Lanka. Proceedings of the Workshop on Quality Related Issues in Higher Education in Sri Lanka. Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors and Improvement of Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education Project of the Ministry of Higher Education, 1 - 11 pp.
- Ratnayake, L.L. 2008. Access to higher education in Sri Lanka. Proceedings of the Workshop on Quality Related Issues in Higher Education in Sri Lanka. Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Directors and Improvement of Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education Project of the Ministry of Higher Education, 40 - 45 pp.
- UGC 2007. Admission to Undergraduate Courses of the Universities in Sri Lanka. Academic year 2006/2007. University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, 82 pp.
- UGC 2008. Admission to Undergraduate Courses of the Universities in Sri Lanka. Academic year 2007/2008. University Grants Commission, Sri Lanka, 84 pp.