

Higher Education for Future Sri Lanka: Suggestions for Improvement

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Lot of questions in higher education is left unanswered in the post-independent Sri Lanka. The misalignment between economic models under experiment and the end product of education has historically caused unimaginable devastations. The sparks of those destructions still gleam across generations and ethnicities. After decades of negligence, rhetoric, trial and failures, again we have come to another milestone of history where there is hope for revision, reconciliation and recovery. What role does education have to play in this juncture? What is the role of academic scholars and policy makers? How far scholarly research and findings will help Sri Lanka to improve the present status quo and prepare its people for the process of transformation to a digitalized global era?

Sri Lankan society, like any other post-colonial nation, is made of complex internal contradictions. At a macro level changing agrarian economy, civil uprisings, party politics, unemployment, crisis in education, infra-structure development and corruption have gradually made Sri Lanka lives miserable over the last sixty years. Ethno-cultural contradictions, human interactions, tradition and interpretations, religion, impact of social media and digitalized realities, changing nature of human relationships and disintegration of traditional family function at a micro level to drive us to an entity of uncertainty. Both aspects are part of the social transformation that demands inevitable change. In a situation like this what is necessitated is *transformative education*. Since we are in a process of serious socio-cultural transformation from tradition to modern, the nature of education should facilitate the individuals to cope with the ‘fundamental shift in people’s beliefs and values’ (Miao 2000:3) while also producing a vision for the future. Theoretically speaking, in these conditions people desire for three major knowledge interests; they are, technical interest in controlling and manipulating the environment, a practical interest in understanding human behavior and social norms, and an emancipatory interest in developing people’s self-awareness (Habermas 1971). The responsibility of the scholars in creating a learning environment and subject content for such transformative education still is not fully realized by those who are actually responsible for higher education reforms. In this context, there must always be a national coordination between incentives for higher scholarly research and the policy designing for the future.

The mismatch between academic research and national requisites has worried many intellectuals over the last twenty years. The nature of academic research might not necessarily demand national requirements or the scholarly researches are not driven by the priorities of a particular socio-cultural context. Sometimes they may not exactly fit into the phase of ‘solutions’ that societies wait for. Research is an independent project that intends to make discoveries and provide ‘new theoretical insights or improved understanding of issues’ (Creedy 2002: 7). Therefore, theoretically, scholars are not bound to conduct research for timely recommendations or solving issues. However, it is also clear that every scholar has a social obligation to do something for the betterment of a particular community that he or she lives in. Hence, in a crucial moment like this where we still struggle to come to term with what our future would look like, it is not unfair to demand some concern from the academic community to use their experience, knowledge and focus to contribute for the future development of our nation. In short, the policy makers need to look into the findings of the scholarly researches (both national and international) when designing policy frameworks. So, how are we going to make the connection between scholarly research and national requirements? The connection, as I think, should technically be made through an integrated National Plan for future development of Sri Lanka. When I say ‘technically’, we must keep in mind that though things can be done through institutionalized regulations, the best motivator is the moral obligation that occurs to us spontaneously and drives us to work voluntarily. What is felt to us should come from within, not from an external agency. If we truly want future success, there is no way than the hard way.

Since the nature and requirements of Higher Education in the Third World (very much applicable to changing societies such as ours) keep on changing in quick succession in a context of fast evolving globalization, there must be a Nation Plan for Higher Education which should be subject to change in every five year. Such plan for Higher Education should necessarily be integrated to the National Development Plan. A centralized body representing all Provincial Councils and other key governmental bodies should identify the national educational requirements every year and report them to the above body. There must be a co-ordination between such body and the National Universities and National Vocational Bodies before deciding on the priorities of research areas in Higher Education and subsequent funding concerns. The common grievance of the university academics is the lack of co-ordination between academic research and policy implementation bodies which seriously consider such research findings. For example, there was no substantial research conducted or any empirical observation done in the field of TESL (Teaching English as a Second Language) prior to introducing the recent National Policy called *Speak English In Our Way* adapted under the *Ten Year National Plan for Trilingual Sri Lanka* (possible theoretical implications of this policy is observed by R. Ibrahim 2012) . The recommendations of this report are apparently based on a Socio-Linguistic Survey of Sri Lanka conducted in 2010 August. While the concept appears useful and timely in the context of social harmony, an undergraduate research conducted by the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages, Sabaragamuwa University of Sri Lanka found out that the lack of co-ordination with the respective teachers in secondary education, lack of awareness and preparation, mismatch between school reality and the kind of training received have functioned as hindrances in achieving its full potential (Hennayaka 2013). There is no adequate theoretical underpinning (derived from both local and international evidence) to see the precise scientific relationship between the implementation of ‘trilingualism’ (or multilingualism) and enhancement of ethnic harmony in Sri Lanka. As far as the improved economic competitiveness of the minorities is concerned, it is also doubtful whether such measure precisely meets the ‘thwarted aspirations’ (Bandarage 2009: 63) of those who ferociously waged a secessionist war against the majority Sinhalese.

Sadly, it is also important to mention that another ongoing research by an undergraduate in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Languages found that there is no proper ‘coping strategy’ and a teaching methodology adapted for the war-affected and traumatized school children in North and East (Herath 2014 and Hariharathamotharan 2014). When education has historically become a major concern of the Tamil politicians and intellectuals (Perera 1999; Dissanayaka 2003; Wijesinha 2007; Anandasangaree 2007) such humanistic and pedagogical approach should be the most important national concern of a nation which suffered a devastating war of thirty years, and does not want the history to repeat. First, there is no mechanism to find out the true requirements of such communities and second, there is a disparity in the academic research interests and national requirements. There must always be an alignment between the two. And if we truly want a ‘truly free and open society’ (Amaratunga 2002: 93) where ‘*human life is rightly employed in perfecting and beautifying*’ (John Stuart Mill 1976) higher education stands in the forefront in shaping future humanity. Therefore, a research culture that looks into the true needs of communities, their real issues and aspirations and setting national goals which go hand in hand is necessary.

Such research culture is the key to reach the international standards of globalized university education. In the policy manifesto of the present UPFA government, there is a remark on the need of an intellectual who is globally acknowledged (*Mahinda Chinthana* 2010: 16). This also talks about university education and its competitiveness in the global context. In this case, while enhancing subject knowledge, English Language competency, IT and other life skills (and soft skills) among the undergraduates and staff, the research culture should also be taken into serious consideration. The academic staff should publish their findings in internationally recognized/ index academic journals while there is a similar mechanism for the undergraduates as well. What the editors of those journals often say is that the conceptual framework of the local authors does not fit in line with the contemporary literature developed by Anglo-American research paradigms in the last twenty to thirty years. Therefore, there must be a change (difference) in the

kind of research literature that is often adapted by local researchers. We should focus on the reading culture as well as the type of exposure to the recent developments in the global academic scene.

However, there must also be certain priorities for academic research and funding. We must identify the most significant areas of study for national development for the next twenty years or so when certain research proposals are considered for national funding such as UGC Research Grants and NCAS. One such area can be primary education in distant areas such as North and East; another would be health issues in such regions etc. Such priority can be an incentive or motivation for young researchers from Humanities/ Applied Sciences. If they need funds for international publications or conference presentations, and if their research areas fall in line with such national priorities, more grants should be allocated for them. The UGC has already published such priority list in their web site. But in their guidelines to financial assistance for academics it has not prioritized anything in relation to social harmony, conceptualizing postwar/future Sri Lanka, primary and secondary education, inequality in education, language policy, power devolution and decentralization, good governance, etc.

What is suggested here is one should not conduct scholarly research according to some priority list prepared by a government agency. It also does not mean to discourage other academic areas which are not included in the national priority list. The independent discoveries irrespective of national priorities or concerns should go on as usual. Such independent research too can come out with unexpected discoveries which can cause 'paradigm shifts' in our thinking. But whatever that must be prioritized should be given a special concern. In this case, education should be given an utmost priority.

Changes should start from education. Such changes should be guided by scholarly research. New research findings should pragmatically be incorporated to the process of education. Any effort to redesign Higher Education for the future Sri Lanka has to consider few major global developments that took place in the last few decades. At least, Sri Lankan higher education should consider the followings for its future development strategies;

- a. *Device based education*: Smart phones and portable tablets have opened up a new space for distanced education where the teacher's intervention has been minimized. Since this is coupled with Outcome Based Education (OBE) and *Open Online Courses* (sometimes referred to as MOOCs- Massive Open Online Courses), the traditional mode of delivery has to change. It should be mentioned here that some of these elements were introduced to Humanities streams by the World Bank funded HETC (Higher Education for the Twenty First Century) Project from 2013. At the same time, the traditional classroom based education too has to undergo structural changes. The online learning management systems and software have a strong impact on learning process of the students both secondary and tertiary levels. The traditional syllabi have to be realigned to incorporate and facilitate the process of inculcating new skills, aspirations and orientations of the new generation into the teaching and learning process. Technology is the meeting point of the requirements of the new age and expectations of the digital generation. If properly utilized, the technology can actually minimize the human resource gap between 'haves' and 'have-nots' in primary and secondary education. It is important to remember that a digital device cannot simply replace the role of a teacher (Hapugoda 2012), but sharing information can also make a difference.
- b. *Getting ready for the Digital Age*: In future, the internet will be available like electricity in every household, and it will automatically be embedded in the ordinary lives of citizens in the next ten years. Since it facilitates learning beyond geographical borders, this can give a new outlook to the traditional way of classroom education and the way of scholarly research delivery. It has introduced rapid methods in knowledge dissemination and interpretation encompassing traditional geo-political barriers. However, the researchers should look into this upcoming change in the

communities and make suggestions to get rid of the adverse effects that such change in medium of communication and information sharing can generate in the lives of people. They should understand that the evolution of technology will eventually 'reconstruct' all the socio-cultural models that man has developed in the 20th century (example: political and public sphere, education, communication, social relationships, health, business and entertainment). Together with positive outcomes, there will be negative developments such as internet abuse, plagiarism, unwanted exposure to pornography and crime, violation of privacy and security, devoid of reality etc. Education should prepare individuals for this aspect of societal evolution at present and in future.

- c. *Critical Thinking and education free from traditional bias*: Given the context that our children have grown into deep ethnic and cultural divisions, the education has a pioneering role to play to eliminate the traditional biases within our societies. Therefore, in the face of transformation to digital era and to student based learning (or outcome based learning), the quality content and critical inquiry of modern education should not be forgotten at any cost. The quality content of education should modernize the individuals' minds and translate him or her to think positively, rationally and secularly. Secular education does not mean that the modern individuals should not carry an enlightened spiritual integrity. The true meaning of this is that such spiritual content must emerge from logical reasoning. For instance, one can be religious, but not without its rational emancipation potential in understanding self and relating to the other. Only such individual can respect his social *Other* and tolerate the difference. Only rational thinking and logical understanding can prevent fundamentalism, terrorism, techno-phobia and social violence and experience passion for diverse human nature.

The love of liberty, in the only proper sense of that word is unselfish; it places no one in a position of hostility to the good of his fellow creatures; all alike may be free, and the human freedom of one has no solid security but in the equal freedom of the rest; the appetite for power is on the contrary essentially selfish, for all cannot have power; the power of one is power over others, who not only do not share in his elevation, but whose depression is the foundation on which it is raised (John Stuart Mill 1862 cited in Amaratunga 2002).

- d. *English Language Proficiency*: Today, though technology itself can guide the user (as how to use it) even without a fundamental understanding about language, a higher pedagogical applications require precision in language skills especially English as the language of technology. Technology now facilitates translation and transliteration and the user can familiarize himself or herself with these new trends even from a non-English speaking environment. But this does not solve the problem of creative and logical expression in knowledge building process. Despite the miracles in technology, it is ultimately up to the user to use the language creatively, meaningfully and argumentatively. The mode of communication may change but how to use the language still remains with the originality and skillfulness of the user.

To help the new generation in coping with technology and the future potentials in the world of work, English education should begin from primary stage in school education. It should be made compulsory from a very early stage of school education since it is the language through which higher cognitive capacities can be developed in individuals at a later stage in a post-colonial setting such as ours. Even after centuries from Industrial Revolution and Imperialism, still it is the language of modern secularism, rationalism and individualism. Whether vernacular can do the same has to be debated elsewhere.

As I mentioned in the previous paragraph, everything should begin with school education. In this regard, many positive suggestions in relation to improving the quality of school education have been made by Prof. Rajiva Wijesinha in his recent book titled *The Care of Children: Theory and Practice* (2013). In the book, Part 1 is devoted to elaborate on the nature of improvements required in school education, especially in areas such as teaching content, evaluation methods, school administration, teacher education and training, structural changes and automatic teacher

transfers (see 80-135). With his own experience, he also suggests some important reforms to the existing university education too.

English should be the language of instruction in University education except for certain language based disciplines such as Sinhala, Tamil, Hindi, Chinese etc. At the same time, all the foundation courses in the first year should be taught in English and if the English language requirement is not met by the candidate, it should be a major disqualification for his or her undergraduate profile. Such candidate should not proceed to the next stage without the English language requirement (together with basic IT, General IQ or Scientific Thinking, Current Affairs, Mother Tongue Proficiency etc.). If any university or Faculty fails to make the English language requirement compulsory, the UGC or the Ministry of Higher Education should re-think of funding them for future. The country has no time or money to waste anymore. We cannot afford to do mistakes once more. Hence, we cannot afford to spend money for producing unemployable graduates who cannot think creatively and innovatively for rebuilding Sri Lanka. Similarly, we also cannot afford to produce teachers who cannot inculcate modern values and skills in students. We need a new environment where we are collectively responsible for each other and for the future of the country.

In this case, technology, social media and open online courses coupled with critical thinking can be used to materialize social harmony by minimizing obvious cultural differences. Here, technology, device based education and social media would be a *melting pot* for different people to meet, eliminate their traditional bias and understand each other with respect.

- e. *Networked Global Economy and Education*: The IT based transformation in higher education today can go hand in hand with the Networked Economy that is blooming day by day. This requires specific skills in Information Technology and creativity in languages. Service delivery, consultations, financial transactions, online purchasing now take place in an unthinkable speed. Therefore, higher education and its methods of teaching should incorporate the significance and adaptability of these technological forms into the future development of economy through their designing of teaching objectives and outcomes.

If I repeat, technology evolves in an unimaginable speed. The way we gather, store and share information has changed radically while higher education (especially university education in Sri Lanka) remained unchanged until recent times (at least for Humanities). The Higher Education in future Sri Lanka should always facilitate the younger generation to be qualified and skilled to meet the challenges of the digitalized global era while being knowledgeable about Classical disciplines of the previous era. It should prepare the future generation to find new opportunities, employments and to pursue further higher educational avenues. They must be trained to learn outside the classroom. Then only Sri Lanka would be able to produce mature adults.

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