SHIFTING PARADIGMS OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

This paper focuses on how the present higher education system of Sri Lanka should be re-engineered or re-thought. The prevailing higher education system has many advantages and strengths as well as some weaknesses, and faces a few threats too. If we can address these weaknesses and threats, our higher education system can be converted into a “modern” and “world class” system within very short period. Our mindset or the paradigms on which our thinking is based play a vital role in that process. The core of the discussion in this paper is on changing this mindset or shifting the paradigms, which is a prerequisite to achieve change in an effective and efficient manner. When our external environmental factors are changing rapidly, if we do not change our interior, comprising people, processes and strategies effectively, our organizations become obsolete.

Keywords: enterprising graduates, globally employable graduates, K-SAM, paradigms, professional graduates, world ranking of universities

Introduction

Sri Lankan Higher Education (HE) today is at a crossroads. As a middle income country with a per capita income of US$ 2,835 (in 2011 WDI July 2012) it is aiming to reach the next level, that is, to become a high income country. Sri Lanka has a new vision – “to be the emerging wonder of Asia” or “to be the miracle of Asia”. A vital input in achieving these long-term goals is “Human Capital” development, which will be the key to realize the set vision and mission of the nation.

The higher education environment of Sri Lanka has changed dramatically with the open market operation and under the influence of international and global educational flows and institutional operations. Nearly 10,000 (9,970 in 2010 according to the Annual Report, Ministry of Finance and Planning, 2011) students are going abroad annually and a majority of them are returning to Sri Lanka with international educational qualifications and experience. Many foreign universities and institutes are offering affiliated degrees and other qualifications in the country at a comparatively low cost. Many world-recognized professional courses are offered and many students are simultaneously following both degree and professional programs to market themselves competitively, locally and globally. Most of these students are ones who could not enter the local universities to do their degrees in state universities or state higher educational
institutes. This means that local graduates have to compete with these foreign graduates and professionals who are qualifying locally in internationally recognized institutes.

If these changes are ignored by state sector higher educational institutions and they continue to produce the same type of graduates whom we produced traditionally, the demand for local graduates may diminish, especially for graduates in the fields of liberal arts and social sciences.

Besides competing with the graduates and professionals referred to above, liberal arts graduates have to compete with state university graduates from other faculties like Science and Agriculture for state sector jobs like in the SLAS, Planning Service, Customs etc. This has become a huge challenge for them.

It is high time that by the state universities and other higher educational institutes understood the challenges and appreciate that the only answer before them is to make appropriate changes without further delay to their internal processes, strategies and techniques to face the challenge.

The UNESCO report, “The Role of Higher Education in Society” (1991) has clearly identified the two principal channels of action of the university within its social function, namely:

a) the training of specialists, of professionals and of highly qualified manpower to meet the needs of governments, of industry and business, and all branches of society; and

b) the provision of a range of services to a specific region or community which can take on a great variety of forms.

The above UNESCO report clearly accepts the fact that universities should produce the specialists, professionals and qualified manpower to meet the needs of the labour market. If we neglect that responsibility, our graduates will become obsolete and the resources that we spent on them will be wasted.

Furthermore, under the open-market fundamentals, the private sector is destined to be ‘the engine of growth’, to which I would add that the public sector will be ‘the gear-box of the growth’, deciding the speed and direction of the growth. In that sense, the public sector as whole and the public universities especially have a bigger role to play in the economic growth of Sri Lanka.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines higher education as “education beyond the secondary level; especially: education provided by a college or university”. In the Sri Lankan context, all education beyond the secondary level, except vocational training can be considered as higher education.

Keeping the above background as the backdrop the main focus of this paper is on re-engineering the total higher education sector of Sri Lanka to support the long-term aspirations of Sri Lanka – to take the country in to the next level. Thus, the paper will
examine and raise the following questions and explore possible answers to the questions raised.

- What are the long-term aspirations of the country?
- What are the salient aspects of the changing environment of global higher education?
- What is their impact on universities and other HEIs, and what should be the role of Sri Lankan higher education in their context?
- Where do we stand now and where do we seek to be?
- What are our deficiencies and what should be done to overcome them?

The main objective of this paper would have been fulfilled if, at the end of the paper, we can find some reasonable answers to the questions raised.

**Long-term aspirations of Sri Lanka**

Our nation’s long-term vision is to be the emerging miracle of Asia. It is an inspiring vision for us to focus on and work together to achieve, aided by proper analysis and strategies.

For achieving this vision we have developed five specific goals based on our core competencies and strategic location, to become a hub in five key sectors. Thus the goals are to be a naval hub, to be an aviation hub, to be a business and commercial hub, to be an energy hub, and to be a knowledge hub.

Of the five hubs, the central hub will be the “knowledge hub” since without knowledge or human capital it is impossible task to achieve other four hub statuses effectively and efficiently. Developing “Human Capital” or suitable “Knowledge Workers” demanded by the long-term vision and goals of the nation is a major responsibility of the Higher Education System of the country. What we have been producing through our traditional and higher education systems is now inadequate since the external environment has changed drastically and demands a modern product (graduate) in contrast to the traditional graduate whom we have being producing.

To illustrate, for long, the ability to write with a pen was good enough for a graduate, but today it is not enough to make him/her a “Knowledge Worker” and (s)he should be equipped with computer or ICT knowledge and English to make him/her employable and effective human capital. Traditionally, university graduates were mainly employed in the public sector of Sri Lanka, and being in possession of a degree certificate was enough to obtain an employment after facing to an IQ test and/or an interview. Today, IQ itself is not enough to pass the tests and interviews, and (s)he should demonstrate additional skills like EQ (Emotional Quotient), ExQ (Execution Quotient), soft skills
and conceptual skills. Today’s job market is demanding up-to-date knowledge (theory + practical) and skills (human/soft skills: initiative, commitment, innovative, pragmatic and practical, problem solving, results oriented, team work, leadership etc.), right attitude and right mindset too.

A World Bank report on Higher Education of Sri Lanka (2009) has explained the same as follows:

“Sri Lanka’s future in the global knowledge economy of the twenty-first century depends critically on the country’s intellectual and human capital. The ability of people to think and act creatively, work industriously and productively, and innovate and adapt available technologies to strengthen economic activities is cardinaly important in the modern world. In this context, Sri Lanka needs a higher education system that can produce skilled, hard-working and enterprising graduates. Also, the country needs research and innovation capacity capable of promoting dynamic economic development”. (Towers of Learning, World Bank, 2009, pp.1).

The above statement of the World Bank clearly highlights the direct link between higher education and the economic development of Sri Lanka.

Parents and children’s expectations

Expectations of parents and university students also play a vital role in this exercise. Parents and children are the customers of the higher education on the one hand and we can on the other hand consider the students as “products” of the universities and other higher educational institutes, that are demanded by the labour market.

Expectations of students now include not only knowledge but also wider skills. It is no longer sufficient for them to graduate with a degree in philosophy, physics, biology, management or English. Their expectation is for skills in areas like communication, interaction, team work, business activities, decision making, social entrepreneurial work, leadership etc., in addition to conventional knowledge.

As customers, parents and students have many expectations, the main expectation being finding good employment with a reasonable income, job security and social recognition. Also, if a student, after graduation, will belong to the lower income group his/her main objective will be to join the “middle income group” by using his/her degree or other qualification by obtaining a suitable job, in a locally or globally recognized organization.

Thus, all Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) have two markets to satisfy, namely the “parents and students” market and the “employers” market. While the students are on the one hand the customers of the universities and all the HEIs, they are on the other hand potential “products” of the universities or other HEIs targeting the labour market or the prospective employers.
If the student fails to become a quality graduate or a product (he) will be unable to find suitable employment opportunities or become “un-employed graduates”. Then, students as well as parents will be dissatisfied. On top of this, prospective employers will also be dissatisfied since they are unable to find suitable candidates from among the graduates from the HEIs.

**General public and the government**

Since we have free education in Sri Lanka, all the public sector universities and HEIs are funded by the Treasury using taxes collected from the general public. If the graduates are “un-employed” general public views the investment in the graduates as a waste.

From the government’s perspective, the accumulation of a large number of graduates in the country becomes a liability to the government as it has the responsibility to provide some kind of employment for them in the public sector, although the system does not really require their services. Even more worrying are the negative effects and the invisible cost and burden to the system resulting from the recruitment of unemployed graduates by the government without appropriate vacancies or need.

For example, if the government recruits 40,000 unemployed graduates to the public sector the cost in salaries alone to the government will be as follows:

Assuming an initial monthly salary of Rs.15,000, the monthly cost in salaries will be Rs.15,000 x 40,000 (= Rs.600,000,000).

This will amount to an annual cost of Rs.600 million x 12 (= Rs. 7.2 billion).

If the age at recruitment is 30 years, assuming an average life expectancy of 70 years, the government will need to pay them a salary and a pension for the remaining 40 years. Assuming an average monthly salary/pension of Rs. 40,000 for the graduates during the period, the total cost of the 40,000 graduates to the government will be:

Rs.40,000 x 40,000 x 12 x 40 = Rs.768 billion.

Therefore, if graduates become unproductive employees in the public sector, it will be a huge burden on the government and a waste of taxes paid by general public.

**Labour market expectations**

On the other hand, employers of various organizations look forward to hire skilled, high quality graduates with the right attitudes and mindset to make their organizations more sustainable and expanding their activities in their respective fields. They expect something more than average from graduates since they are the “cream of the cream” of our educational system. In other words the industry wants them to develop into “good
leaders” or “effective managers” in the course of their career and expects their contribution towards elevating the organizations to a higher level. To be a good leader or manager or even to become an effective middle-level employee, a graduate needs: Knowledge (up-to-date theoretical and practical knowledge), Skills (basic + specialised skills), Attitudes (positive and appropriate) and Mindset (how one perceives the world) – “K-SAM”.

As discussed earlier, when we consider graduates as “products” in a job market, the employers expect the above K-SAM features from all graduates, and those features will certainly be assessed during the recruitment process.

**Universities and Higher Educational Institutes (HEIs)**

In the present model, the universities and the HEIs are placed in-between the secondary educational institutes and the Industry or the job market. Here, primary and secondary schools, after providing 13 years of education, let the students sit the GCE-A/L examination. The highest rated students become the input to the universities and HEIs. They go through a process of teaching-learning and research for three to four years (five years in the case of medical education) and become the output of the universities and HEIs. These graduates (or the output) become the input to the industry or the job market.

The demand is from the job market and there are graduates with a very high demand while some have a medium level of demand and others a very low demand. A tool called “Employability Ratio” (ER) may be used to identify the level of demand as high or low.

Employability is defined as “the ability to gain initial employment; hence the interest in ensuring that ‘key skills’, careers advice and an understanding about the world of work are embedded in the education system”.

It may also be defined as “a set of achievements – skills, understanding and personal attributes – that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy”.

Both definitions provide a good guideline to the “employability” or “the ability of gain initial employment”, which is the focus of this article.

Through the Higher Education for Twenty-first Century (HETC) project funded by the World Bank, the Ministry of Higher Education calculated the “Employability Ratio (ER)” of each university during the year 2012. The surveys were carried out at the “graduation ceremony of each university”, with graduation held between two and sixteen (2-16) months of qualifying from the university. In this study, employability is defined based on “whether the graduates were employed or not by the date of graduation ceremony”.
As at 1st of July, 2012 ER data for the following universities were available from the HETC project and is summarised below.

The data (ER) was gathered when the students attended their graduation ceremony. The time lapse between the passing out of students and their graduation varied between universities and even faculties of one university. Thus, direct comparison based on the data will not be reasonable. However, there was no other practical way to compile the relevant data. Nevertheless, the information contained therein is adequate to obtain a fair impression of patterns of employability. It should be noted that the number of students graduating from the different faculties also varies from small to large numbers. Conclusions have been drawn based on the data, knowing well the limitations.

**Overall Employability**

The overall ER of each university based on the survey data and results is presented in Fig. 1 for seven universities in Sri Lanka, namely the Peradeniya, Ruhuna, Jayawardenapura, Sabaragamuwa, Rajarata, South-Eastern and Uva-Wellassa Universities.

![Employment Status by University - Av 54%](image)

**Figure 1:** Employment Status by University
The average overall employability ratio of the seven universities was 54%, with the average ERs tabulated below in descending order.

**Table1**: Employment Status by University

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Under-employed</th>
<th>Unemployed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wayamba</td>
<td>83.1</td>
<td>6.9</td>
<td>10.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ruhuna</td>
<td>59.4</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>31.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Jayawardenapura</td>
<td>54.2</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>32.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peradeniya</td>
<td>53.8</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>38.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajarata</td>
<td>53.4</td>
<td>13.0</td>
<td>33.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sabaragamuwa</td>
<td>42.4</td>
<td>12.3</td>
<td>45.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Eastern</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>54.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The second column in Table 1 identifies “fully employed” graduates, meaning that they are in jobs matching with their qualifications; the third column identifies the “under employed” graduates, meaning that they are doing jobs but not matching with their qualifications; and the last column gives the “unemployed” ratio of the respective university.

**Employability Ratio at Faculty Level**

At least two of the six faculties, namely Agriculture, Arts, Engineering, Management, Medicine, and Science, exist in each university considered. The Employability Ratio data is presented below university-wise for the six faculties in the order in which they are listed.

**Faculties of Agriculture**

Of the seven universities five have Agriculture Faculties and their ER data is shown in Fig. 2 below.
Employment Status by University – Avr – 70.32%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>No. Respondents</th>
<th>Eff. Dates (months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WUSL</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDN</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHN</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUSL</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSL</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>6-15.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2**: University-wise Employment Status: Agriculture Faculties

The overall average employability for Agriculture graduates is 70.32%. Sabaragamuwa University has the lowest ER of 51.4% compared with ER values calculated as 80.4%, 73.9%, 73.0%, and 72.9%, respectively, for the Rajarata, Peradeniya, Wayamba and Ruhuna universities from 72.9% to 80.4% for the rest. The reason for the low ER rating for Sabaragamuwa University is that they held their graduation ceremony just 2 months after the passing out of graduates. Rajarata University shows the best ER since their graduation was held between 6 and 15 months, for two successive of two batches following the passing out of graduates.

**Faculties of Arts and Social Sciences**

Figure 3 below shows the ER for university faculties of Arts and Social sciences.
The average ER for all Arts/Social Sciences graduates is 23.6% with values for individual faculties varying between 14.5% and 30.9%. Again Sabaragamuwa with only 188 graduates shows the lowest (14.5%) since their graduation was held after 1.5 months from passing out. The largest number of Arts graduates (853) came from USJP, and the ER is 23.4%, three months after passing out. The next largest number (778) is from Peradeniya with an ER of 18.3%, four months from passing out, while Ruhuna produced 535 Arts graduates with an ER of 27.1% after 17 months from passing out. Rajarata and South Eastern universities, with only 175 and 214 Arts graduates, respectively, have both an ER of 30.9%, after 12 and 21 months since passing out.

Though the interval between passing out and graduation ranges from 1.5 months to 21 months, ER has remained low for all Arts faculties, indicating a big gap between market demand and the quality of graduates produced.

This is one of the major issues that we have to focus on and pay high attention to in developing both short and long term strategies to improve the situation.

Several fresh initiatives are possible to improve the Employability of Arts graduates and will be presented later in the paper.

Faculties of Engineering

There are three Engineering Faculties in Sri Lanka, excluding the Open University whose system cannot be directly compared with the others. Results are shown below in
Fig. 4 for the two faculties in the Universities of Ruhuna and Peradeniya. Data for the University of Moratuwa are being processed, and will be available soon.

**Table: Employment Status by University**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>No. Respondents</th>
<th>Eff. Dates (months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>RHN</td>
<td>198</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDN</td>
<td>327</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4: University-wise Employment Status: Engineering Faculties**

As far as the Engineering Faculties are concerned, both Ruhuna and Peradeniya show very high ER values of 92.4% and 93%, respectively. In both cases, the graduation ceremony was held five months from passing out. Clearly, employability is very high for both engineering faculties, indicating that the quality of the graduates is up to standard.

**Faculties of Management**

Results are shown in Fig. 5 below for the Faculties of Management in six of the seven universities where they exist.
The average ER based on survey data for the six faculties is 60.4%, compared with average ER values of 23.6% for Arts and 92.7% for Engineering. Thus, ERs for the Management faculties can be considered to be in the medium range, varying from 46.4% for Sabaragamuwa (125 students) to 77.0% for Wayamba (113 students). Wayamba students had their graduation ceremony eleven (11) months after passing out whereas those at Sabaragamuwa had their graduation two (2) months after passing out. In the cases of Ruhuna (287 students after 11 months), Jayawardenapura (1,521 students after 3 months), Rajarata (121 students after 11 months) and South Eastern (51 students after 21 months), the ERs are 65.5%, 63%, 61.2%, and 50%, respectively.

The average ER for Management is 60.4% which is significantly lower than Agriculture (70.32%), Engineering (92.7%), Medicine (90.33%) and Science (70.4%) but much higher than the Arts (23.6%). This indicates the need to develop and implement effective strategies aimed at improving the employability of Management Faculties and achieve higher ERs in the future.

Faculties of Medicine

Values of ER are shown in Fig. 6 below for the Faculties of Medicine in three of the eight universities offering medical degrees.
Figure 6: University-wise Employment Status: Medical Faculties

The overall average ER is 90.33%, which is the second highest among all faculties. The ER is 93.5% for Peradeniya (185 students after 5 months), 90.4% for Ruhuna (52 students after 9-13 months) 87.1% for Jayawardenapura (302 students after 6-14 months), where the lower values are as a result of having “Para-medical students” in the Medical Faculty.

Faculties of Science

All seven universities considered had Faculties of Science and the results of the survey are shown in Fig. 7 below.
Employment Status by University – Avr – 70.4%

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University</th>
<th>No. Respondents</th>
<th>Eff. Dates (months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>WUSL</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RUSL</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUSL</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>1-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEUSL</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SJP</td>
<td>270</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PDN</td>
<td>350</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RHN</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>3-16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Bar chart showing employment status by university for Science faculties.]

**Figure 7: University-wise Employment Status: Science Faculties**

The average ER for the seven universities is 70.4%, with individual values varying from 56.1% for Sabaragamuwa (101 students after 12 months) to 93.8% for Wayamba (64 students after 3 months). The employability ratios for the remaining five are: Ruhuna, 80.9% (236 students after 3-16 months); Sabaragamuwa, 72.0% (82 students after 1-14 months); Rajarata, 68.3% (101 students after 12 months); Jayawardenapura, 65.2% (270 students after 5 months); Peradeniya, 56.3% (350 students after 5 months); and SEU, 56.1% (57 students after 16 months).

This statistics show that though the average employability ratio is around 70%, for two universities the ERs are around 56% with ERs for two others at 65and 68%, respectively. This indicates that there is much room for improvement of ER and points to the need for more attention to the matter.

**Summary**

To sum up, this is the first time in the history of higher education of Sri Lanka that official statistics have been published for Employability Ratios of Sri Lankan universities, and the data is also provided faculty-wise. It gives a fair picture of the current situation of the graduates, their quality, and level of fitness for the job market. Based on this information, the UGC, Vice Chancellors, University Councils, the Deans and Heads of Departments can take the necessary initiatives to improve the employability of their own graduates, which is one of the main criteria to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the universities and faculties.
Proactively accepting the responsibility towards their own graduates

Based on the above analysis, we can introduce two new goals to the higher education system of Sri Lanka guided by an important principle, namely that all HEIs should proactively accept responsibility towards their graduates. In other words, if the Employability Ratio of our graduates is low, that we should take responsibility proactively and take initiatives to improve that ratio continuously until we achieve the target of 100%.

On the other hand, someone may ask why we should take the responsibility for the graduates. The answer is simple. Universities are the institutions that develop curriculum and course content. They teach and train the students and assess their knowledge and skills through various tests and assignments, and issue the degree certificates. If in the end the graduates are not employable who is responsible?

For example, if an industrial organization manufactures a product which is not marketable, it is the manufacturing company and not anyone else who is responsible for it. The same logic can be applied to the universities too in this regard.

In Sri Lanka, universities are producing graduates but when they are not employable, the government takes the responsibility. If the economy cannot absorb the graduates into the public or private sector, it is reasonable for the government to take responsibility. But if the economy offers enough opportunities, especially in the private sector, but the graduates fail to match the needs of the job market and as a result the graduates remain unemployed, then the HEIs should take the responsibility.

The problem becomes more serious when higher education is free and both students and money are supplied to the universities by a central organization like the UGC, without any effort by the institutions. Most of the HEIs in the world need to compete for resources and students. If the employability of their graduates is not high enough, the survival of the HEIs is at stake as students will not be attracted to institutions which are not producing quality graduates.

Based on the above-stated principle we can have two goals for all HEIs. That is (a) Globally Employable Graduates and (b) 100% Employable Graduates

Globally Employable Graduates (GEGs)

Neither is Sri Lanka nor its economy is isolated, and we are producing Human Capital (HC) targeting the world market. As a result, one of our major exports today is Human Resources, which earn around US$6 billion annually through export of human capital to the world market. In that sense, even HEIs of this country cannot be an exception but need to follow the trend. Therefore, by definition, all HEIs of the country should produce “Globally Employable Graduates” (GEGs). In which case, finding jobs for
22,000 graduates annually will not be an issue at all if we target both local and global markets for our graduates.

Abdullah Bin Ahmed Badawi, Prime Minister of Malaysia, in his Opening Address to the 2006 Meeting of the Association of Commonwealth Universities said: “I do believe that it is necessary to stress that for most countries today, human resource development and human capital formation are either extremely important, absolutely vital, or a matter of life and death. In the case of Malaysia…we think it is a matter of life or death.”

I think that the statement is very much valid for Sri Lanka and especially for our HEIs and the universities in particular.

100% Employable Graduates

The HEIs should also aim to produce 100% employable graduates. As we have seen in the previous section, in Engineering and Medicine our graduates are almost 100% employable. Science, Agriculture and Management graduates follow with employability at the time of the graduation ceremony at 70.32%, 70.4% and 60.4%, respectively. Therefore, the respective universities, faculties and departments should seriously target 100% employability by introducing innovative strategies and programs. In the case of the Arts Faculties the average ER is very low at 23.6%. Therefore it is very important to re-think the program content, delivery, teaching and learning process, evaluation, quality assurance processes etc. of the degree programs in the light of employability.

World Class Universities (WCUs)

At the same time, Sri Lanka should focus on how to transform a few selected universities into World Class Universities. One definition of WCUs follows from Williams and Van Dyke (2007):

“In the past decade, the term ‘world-class university’ has become a catch phrase for not simply improving the quality of learning and research in tertiary education but more importantly for developing the capacity to compete in the global tertiary education marketplace through the acquisition and creation of advanced knowledge. With students looking to attend the best possible institution they can afford, often regardless of national borders, and governments keen on maximizing the returns on their investments on universities, global standing is becoming an increasingly important concern for institutions around the world”.

For any university to become a WCU there are three criteria to be fulfilled, which are:

1. The University academics and students should publish their research in refereed journals and those articles should be cited by other researchers;

2. The University should have an international academic and student community;
3. The University should produce globally employable graduates.

Another definition of a WCU follows from Levin, et. al. (2006):

“In general, there is wide agreement that great universities have three major roles: (1) Excellence in education of their students; (2) research, development and dissemination of knowledge; and (3) activities contributing to the cultural, scientific, and civic life of society. By excellence in education we refer to the resources and organization of undergraduate, graduate, and professional instruction and educational opportunities for students. Clearly, this goal requires outstanding faculty, high quality teaching and other instructional activities, and availability of good libraries, laboratories, and other pertinent facilities as well as highly prepared and motivated students who serve to educate through their peer influence. Research, development, and dissemination of knowledge refer to the embryonic identification, growth, and extension of concepts and ideas as well as their transformation into applications, goods, and services that enhance understanding and welfare. Activities contributing to the cultural, scientific, and civic life of society are many and varied, but include conferences, publications, artistic events and forums as well as provision of services (e.g. medical clinics and hospitals or museums) that engage and contribute to the larger community including the regional, national, and international communities.”

Based on this thinking and concepts already we have selected seven universities to be developed as WCUs in Sri Lanka. Originally, of fifteen universities only six universities, namely Colombo, Moratuwa, Peradeniya, Jayawardenapura, Kelaniya and Ruhuna, were selected when the concept was introduced in 2011. The University of Jaffna has been added to the list in 2012, and already Rs.600 million has been allocated for this project in the 2011 Budget.

As a result, the world rankings of the selected universities and others too have drastically improved. The details are as follows. (Please see the Table 2 below).

**Table 2: World Ranking of Sri Lankan Universities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2012 July World Rank</th>
<th>South Asian Rank July ’12</th>
<th>2011 January World Rank</th>
<th>University</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1681</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>2690</td>
<td>University of Colombo</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>2324</td>
<td>University of Moratuwa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2466</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>2615</td>
<td>University of Peradeniya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2758</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>6068</td>
<td>University of Sri Jayewardenapura</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3047</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>6104</td>
<td>University of Kelaniya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3293</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>2552</td>
<td>University of Ruhuna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5662</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>9096</td>
<td>University of Jaffna</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Ranking Web of World Universities, 2012 July vs 2011 January*
The target of this project is to take at least the selected six (6) universities into the top 500 universities of the world, the top 100 of South Asian universities, and the top 100 of Asian Universities.

Based on the above latest ranking, all the six selected universities in 2011 have achieved ranking among the top 3300 of the world universities which is a remarkable achievement comparing to the 2011 January ranking. At the same time all six universities are among the top 55 (target was top 100) of South Asian Universities.

Remarkably, we have already achieved one of our targets already in 2012 July, which is to be among the top 100 universities in South Asia. All six universities are now among the top 55 universities in the South Asia: Colombo University is ranked 12th, with Moratuwa 14th, Peradeniya 27th, Jayawardenapura 38th and Kelaniya 48th, followed by Ruhuna in 54th position.

Our next target is to position all the selected seven universities (including Jaffna) among the top 1000 world universities and among the top 100 Asian Universities by 2015.

**Globally employable graduates**

Today, Sri Lanka is not an isolated Island and we are producing human capital (HC) targeting the world market. As a result, today our major export is human resources and we earn around US$6 billion annually, with potential for more.

Therefore, our HEIs should, as much as possible, produce graduates who can be employed anywhere in the world with expected K-SAM qualities.

**Enterprising graduates**

Thus far, our higher education system has been designed to produce mainly “job seekers” who are expecting to be employed by someone else. But there are many enterprising and entrepreneurial graduates who are entering to the universities and other HEIs, and we have not created for them a friendly environment that would identify and develop them as entrepreneurs. The author has tried and tested this concept with the undergraduate and postgraduate candidates and proved that we can produce many entrepreneurs if we have the right conducive environment in the system. There are enterprising graduates in all the faculties and we should develop programs to bring them together under a common program while they are following their respective degree programs independently.

All the undergraduates are not good at becoming entrepreneurs. It could even be only 5-10% of the total student population. But if we can cultivate them as entrepreneurs, the 10% will provide employment opportunities to a significant section of the remaining 90% of their colleagues.
Professional Graduates

Another possible alternative program is to improve the “employability of the graduates”, especially the “Liberal Arts” students, is the professional graduates programs. This means while they are following their respective degree programs we can let them follow a professional program of their choice like Marketing, Human Resource Management, Supply Chain and Logistics Management, IT and Accountancy.

We could thus produce graduates with professional qualifications and better employment prospects.

Making education a foreign currency earner

Our education sector has a far greater opportunity to attract foreign students in large numbers to Sri Lanka than our need to send our students to other countries for education. Our British educational background, English language skills, high quality teachers, low cost of living, being a non-aligned nation, the international reputation of our state and non-state educational institutions have a great potential to attract foreign students to Sri Lanka. What seem to be lacking are a long-term vision, and policies and strategies to attract them and make education a major foreign currency earner. Although a very small country Singapore has 98,000 foreign students and neighbouring Malaysia has nearly 120,000 students. On that basis it can be estimated that Sri Lanka could attract at least 100,000 foreign students by year 2020 if we plan well and implement the plan properly.

Alternative paths for liberal arts graduates

To improve the employability of liberal arts graduates, the universities can introduce various new programs for the students. The programs may be IT and BPO related; and marketing, management, human resource management, accounting and finance, language teaching and subject specialist teaching, tourism and hotel management, nursing and several other non-traditional degree and non-degree conversion programs deserve to be considered.

Understanding the gap

At the same time it is high time to understand the employers’ expectations in the local and global markets when they hire graduates for public or private organizations. Archer and Davison (2010:7) in their article “Graduate Employability”, clearly indentify the following as the top ten skills/qualities they measure in recruitment processes.
• Communication skills 86%
• Team-working skills 85%
• Integrity 83%
• Intellectual ability 81%
• Confidence 80%
• Character/personality 79%
• Planning & organizational skills 74%
• Literacy (good writing skills) 71%
• Numeracy (good with numbers) 68%
• Analysis & decision-making skills 67%

Do we really pay attention to the above areas in our teaching and learning processes? The answer is yes and no. In the degree programs where employability is higher the administrators, professors and other related parties have really understood the importance of the above skills and qualities clearly and they have inculcated the relevant activities into their curricula, teaching and learning processes and evaluation processes. Therefore their graduates are rated as very high quality products by the job market which is waiting to recruit them.

On the other hand, there are a few degree programs which are still adhering to the old teaching and learning processes which are highly teacher-centred and producing traditional graduates with knowledge only whereas “employers” are looking for “K-SAM” graduates.

We have to clearly understand this “demand vs. supply” gap and adopt appropriate changes to our systems to urgently reduce the gap.

Conclusion

In summary, we can identify the following shifts from old paradigms to new paradigms in our higher education system.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Paradigm</th>
<th>New Paradigm</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not accepting responsibility</td>
<td>Accepting responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self oriented</td>
<td>Job market oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Locally employable graduates</td>
<td>Globally employable graduates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher centred</td>
<td>Student centred</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge focused</td>
<td>Knowledge, Skills, Attitude, and Mindset (K-SAM) focused</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producing only job seekers</td>
<td>Producing both entrepreneurs and job creators</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not 100% employable graduates</td>
<td>100% employable graduates</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Do not scan the external environment  
Scan the external environment and make appropriate changes

Input oriented  
Results and output oriented

Not evaluating performance  
Evaluate performance and use the indicators

Less focus on foreign students  
High focus on foreign students

From the above summary we can clearly identify the areas needing focusing and the urgency with which changes need to be implemented in those areas.

Today the higher education system itself demands many improvements and changes. Most of the stakeholders have communicated the demands through various channels and in various modes. It is time to work together with the parties concerned to make the necessary changes in appropriate ways and make our higher education system modern, updated, effective and efficient. That is the need of the hour.

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