

# **Facing Global and Local Challenges: The New Dynamics for Higher Education**

## **– Sri Lanka Country Report**

### **1. Introduction**

Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka is an island nation in South Asia with a population of 19.5m (2008). It has been demarcated into 9 provinces and 25 districts. Sri Lanka has an Executive Presidency elected for a period of 6 years by universal adult suffrage. Sri Lanka has a 225 member parliament as well directly elected for 6 years by a system of proportional representation.

Extensive powers have been devolved to 9 directly elected Provincial Councils and over 250 Municipal Councils, Urban Councils and Pradeshiya Sabhas.

The current per capita income of Sri Lanka is USD 1617 and over the last 5 year period the economic growth had been around 5%. Sri Lanka will continue in general to pursue open economic policies, and its attitude towards foreign investment will remain positive.

### **2. Overview of Higher Education System**

The Sri Lankan system of university education began in 1921 with the establishment of the University College, which in 1942, was elevated to the status of a fully fledged University, which, at its inception, accommodated only 904 students. The University of Ceylon was modeled on the Oxbridge formula, and it was elitist and exclusively residential in character. This system of University education, having served a valuable purpose in providing administrative and professional skills in the three decades after the establishment of the University of Ceylon, became outmoded when the impact of the Free Education Scheme came to be felt in the country.

The impact of the Free Education Scheme came to be felt in the sixties and seventies, and the University system, in response to those pressures, some of which were political in character, made certain adjustments whereby the system underwent a change. There was immense dissatisfaction with the Oxbridge model, from which we wanted to break away in order to accommodate the 'Redbrick' formula which brought about an impressive change in Britain. It was on the basis of this formula that Sri Lanka established provincial Universities to expand the opportunities for higher education. These universities are new, and their infrastructure not yet developed, even though the new system broke away from the mould of the conventional university. They introduced new courses which have been organized on the basis of the concept of employability. Our present policy strategy is to produce an employable competent graduate, who can find employment in whatever field he or she undertakes to study.

By establishing the SLIATE in 1994, Government of Sri Lanka created a system of technological education to meet the demand for training which, at the time, was unheard of in higher education. This kind of Institution has to be in step with industrial and technological changes in the country, particularly with regard to the technology

implemented globally. Public and private institutions engaged in development could then make use of this intermediate level of technicians who, in due course, could obtain higher qualifications.

The SLIATE admits around 10,000 students annually again based on the GCE (AL) examination results.

Apart from the above, over 20,000 students register annually, to follow external Degrees (Off Campus Degrees) under the universities and Institutes in Sri Lanka on self financing basis.

The University Grants Commission is the agency admitting undergraduates to all national Universities and their affiliated Campuses and Institutes. The annual enrolment number for undergraduates in national Universities is around 20,000 which is about 2.4% of their age cohort. About 51% of them are female students. However the female student enrolment for engineering, information technology, physical science courses is less than 20%. UGC admits students to Universities based on the results of the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) Examination conducted at national level by the Commissioner General of Examinations. 40% of the enrolment is on merit, 55% on district quota based on their population and 5% has been allocated to underprivileged districts. This system has helped many students from disadvantaged districts and rural areas to enter the Universities in Sri Lanka.

In Sri Lanka, the enrollment rate in Higher Education is low when compared to other countries. The enrollment rate for developing countries is 5%. In Sri Lanka, enrollment in Universities have stagnated around 2 to 2.5%, and in this context, the importance of using Distance Mode of Higher Education has been identified as a way of overcoming this problem.

### **3. Governance**

Higher Education in Sri Lanka is a subject at national government and not a devolved subject. There are 15 national Universities including the Open University, 3 Campuses and 17 affiliated Institutes offering Diploma, Degree and Post Graduate degrees. These Higher Educational Institutes are governed by an Act of Parliament (Universities Act No. 16 of 1978). University Grants Commission (UGC) under the Ministry of Higher Education is the apex body of the Universities in Sri Lanka.

The SLIATE governed by Act No. 29 of 1995 is the apex body in charge of non university higher technological education in Sri Lanka. There are 12 Advanced Technological Institutes (ATII) coming under the purview of SLIATE with 6 Sections which are to be upgraded to the level of institutes in the near future.

The Ministry of Higher Education has two Universities exclusively for Buddhist priests to pursue studies in Buddhism and Pali language and these Universities also have been established under two Acts of Parliament of Sri Lanka. .

In addition to the above, 21 undergraduate and post graduate degree programs are conducted by 7 institutes which award their own degrees in their capacity as Degree Awarding Institutes under the approval of the University Grants Commission.

There are many Professional Institutes and over 50 cross border higher educational institutes operating in Sri Lanka offering diploma and degree level courses. Considering all these students as well the gross enrolment in Higher Education in Sri Lanka is more than 12% of the age cohort.

#### **4. Quality**

While the Universities are empowered to maintain quality of their higher education programs through the Senates by the Universities Act of Sri Lanka, the University Grants Commission too has evolved a system of external Quality Assurance Reviews at Institute and Subject Levels for Universities, Campuses and affiliated Institutes. The professional degrees such as medicine, engineering, architecture etc. are accredited by the professional bodies in Sri Lanka.

World Bank funded Project for Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) is in implementation for improving the academic performance of the higher education sector.

Currently there is no formal system of Quality Assurance and Accreditation of diplomas and degrees awarded by cross border educational institutes. The establishment of an agency to monitor and to carry out quality assurance and accreditation of these diplomas and degrees is under consideration by the government of Sri Lanka.

#### **5. Emerging Issues and Challenges**

The greatest challenge in the 21st century for higher education is the recognition of relevance, which is the need to adapt to the immediate needs of the job market. This, in other words, means that the universities should produce an employable graduate. Through the universities, we need to prepare individuals to contribute to the social and economic development of the country which can be fruitfully achieved if the undergraduates are provided with the relevant skills and the knowledge. It is in this context that higher education needs to be defined as a public service. Higher education can also be defined as that which contributes to cultural, economic and social development within the context of pluralism and cultural diversity.

It is accepted that higher education, in any given society, whether developed or developing, has to play a role in the production and transmission of knowledge. Knowledge is universal and has become the heritage of the mankind. To convert universities into knowledgeable institutions, the institutions in the sphere of higher education need to be encouraged to perform an active, creative and innovative role to

help change society. In other words, universities should function as development institutions – institutions which promote and encourage development.

One of the main issues confronting the higher education sector in Sri Lanka is the limited access to higher education.

A large number of students seeking admission to state universities, where higher education is provided free of charge, are being denied access due to limited places available in the universities. In 2008, 119,000 students were qualified for university admission, but the University Grants Commission was compelled to select only 20,200 students. The increasing demand for higher education is seen in the large numbers registering as off campus students and leaving the country to study abroad.

This issue is presently partly addressed by Capacity building of the Open University of Sri Lanka and popularization of Distance Education with public private partnership under the Distance Education Modernization Project (DEMP) funded by the Asian Development Bank.

Issues concerning quality, need for regulatory framework and mutual recognition of higher educational qualifications, which are common in the region are shared by Sri Lanka as well, with the growing presence of Cross Border Higher Educational Institutes. Strategies to address these issues are under consideration.

Maintaining and upgrading the quality of university education keeping up its past reputation, positioning the Universities among the best universities in the world are challenges to be faced by Sri Lanka in the next few years.

## **6. Financing of Higher Education**

The government policy of Sri Lanka is not to charge any fees from the undergraduate and diploma level students of the Universities, Campuses, affiliated Institutes and ATIL. However the government has allowed them to share the cost of post graduate programs, short term training programs, contract research, consultancy and other services. It has been noted that 95% of the University budgets still come from the treasury funds.

The students coming from low income groups are provided financial assistance from Mahapola scholarships and government bursaries. Universities too have initiated action to obtain funds from individuals, charities and other organizations to get funds for various students bursary schemes.

## **7. Reforms in Higher Education Policies/Institutions**

Sri Lanka, in the period 1994 - 2000, decided to establish universities in the provinces. The provincialization of universities was based on the realization that the country needed a new model that could successfully cater to specific needs.

The view was that the traditional conventional University, with its traditional disciplines, was not the type of university that the country required at this juncture; the country needed a set of new universities which could specialize on courses of studies that are immediately relevant to economic development. Above all, they needed to be courses with which the employability of the graduate could be guaranteed. Therefore, the new universities, which came to be established on the basis of this formula, were expected to be innovative in character.

Changes in global environment have resulted in borderless higher education. With the requirement of lifelong learning and growth of new information and communication technologies, the role of the universities has been challenged. Institutional differentiation has become essential to accommodate the diverse and growing demand for higher education in Sri Lanka.

## **8. Conclusion**

Higher Education, in the context of current developments in Sri Lanka, is of paramount importance for economic and social development. The main challenge before Sri Lanka as in the case of many other developing countries in the region is how to increase access to higher education while at the same time increasing relevance and quality of educational programs and to improve skills of the undergraduates so that they are gainfully employed.

Today, in the global context, challenge before all countries, especially South Asia, is how to expand higher education, as this sector, due to a variety of problems including that of fiscal constraints, face numerous problems which demand new policy initiatives.

Higher education system of Sri Lanka therefore needs to be reformed to make a noteworthy contribution to both development and change in the country. New policy initiatives and a reform strategy is being planned and adopted with a view to reforming the system on the basis of both local and global considerations.