

Venerable Chancellor,
Venerable Mahasanga and Members of the Clergy,
Vice Chancellor,
Members of the University Council and Senate,
Deans and Heads of Departments,
Academic, Administrative and Non Academic Staff,
New Graduates,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

Chancellor, Ven. Professor Bellanvila Wimalarthana Thero, Vice Chancellor Dr. N.L.A. Karunaratna, Dean, Faculty of Arts, Prof. P. Athukorala, Deans of other Faculties, Heads of Departments, Professors, members of the academic staff, Registrar, Bursar and other executive officers, members of the non-academic staff, ladies and gentleman and graduates.

It is indeed a pleasure and an honour to deliver the Convocation address today. Therefore, first of all, I would like to thank Dr. N.L.A. Karunaratna, the Vice Chancellor and Prof. P. Athukorala, Dean, Faculty of Arts and the organizing committee for their kind invitation. Secondly, I understand that all of the participants today have completed a degree in Social Sciences and Humanities and are receiving their certificate today. Please accept my warm wishes on your success.

It is widely accepted that higher education particularly university education is the backbone of a nation. University education enhances the quality of life in every society. It can play a crucially important role in middle-income countries like Sri Lanka based on the global knowledge economy. Today, we agree that higher education is essential for the development of the economy and building a democratic culture. The equity in the quality of education for all, in this age is seen as a vital strategy for furthering socio-economic and political development of a given society. Universities and university education are not an event but a process. University education is not an isolated phenomenon but is subject to the global and national conditions. However, not everyone is fortunate enough to pursue an opportunity in university education as an undergraduate or postgraduate student in either a university or a recognized institute. Therefore, I decided to focus my deliberations on examining and exploring the changing model of university education with special emphasis on university education in our country. This is indeed a very topical subject in our current context as Sri Lanka is

aspiring to become a middle-income country and reduce poverty by ensuring growth and equity in distribution.

Universities in the classical sense originated in the Medieval period in the west. The Universities of Bologna (1088), Paris (1150) Oxford (1167) and Cambridge (1209) were examples of the west. The classical model of the university has undergone waves of transformation through successive periods between the thirteenth century to the nineteenth century and thereafter. It started with the elite model where the university was an institution within the feudal state where subjects such as theology, philosophy, and other classical courses were taught to a selected or elite group of the population. The advent of research universities in the nineteenth century, particularly in Germany and later the United States, introduced science and technology and the rise of the professional school changed the classical role of the university. The departure from the classical and elitist model begins when a system of mass and international universities were established and with the broadening of the curriculum to accommodate newly found disciplines which were considered before as not worth teaching at the university level.

The changing model of university education is evident by the trajectory of university education in the United Kingdom. The oldest universities such as Oxford and Cambridge represented the classical or elite model in the U.K. The universities, which started in the Victorian era of the 19th century such as Manchester and Birmingham, were termed as the redbrick model. The universities established in the 1960s are known as plate-glass or campus universities. The Universities of Sussex and Essex are such examples. Currently, the model of the universities in Great Britain is referred to as the international model. In the elite model, participation in university education was confined to less than six percent of the eligible age cohort leading to the professions or public services. In the 1960s, participation increased beyond 16 per cent and moved into the mass model. Currently, the participation of over fifty per cent is in the category of the international model. Universities in the U.K, the USA, Canada, and Japan come within the category of the international model. In addition, more universities are referred to as World Class universities. The globalization and internationalization of higher education, the massive expansion of higher education, the impact of technology, the growing role of markets, the privatization of higher education, and various efforts towards curriculum reform, have contributed to change the face of the university model.

With the change of the model of the university, the objectives or purpose of the university has changed. In 1963, the report of the Robbins committee on higher education defined four objectives of the university system. The first objective was instruction in skills; the second promotes the general powers of the mind to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women. Third, teaching should not be separate from research. Finally, the transmission of a common culture and common standards of citizenship is defined as contributing to wider development. The Robbins report represented a very English perspective of the university. John Henry Newman in the mid 19th century described the university as a place of universal knowledge in which specialized training was subordinate to the pursuit of a broader liberal education. He thought that knowledge should be pursued for its own sake. For him the search for truth was part of an educational ideal, which shaped the personality of the cultivated man and was inseparable from moral and religious education. His ideas contributed to the development of the British belief that education should aim at producing generalists rather than narrow specialists and could train the mind in ways applicable to a wide range of jobs. The concept of a university by Wilhelm Von Humboldt became the model for Germany and the rest of Europe and later in the United States. He views the university as a community of scholars and students engaged in a common task.

The changes of the model and purposes have changed the characteristics of the university system. Of these characteristics, university autonomy and academic freedom are longstanding concepts in analyzing higher education. Universities are institutions participating in higher learning in the evolution of knowledge that provides facilities for teaching and research and are authorized to hold examinations and grant academic degrees. The Magna Charta Observatory has defined university autonomy as follows: "The University is an autonomous institution at the heart of societies differently organized because of geography and historical heritage; it produces, examines, appraises, and hands down culture by means of research and teaching. To meet the needs of the world around it, its research and teaching must be morally and intellectually independent of all political and economic power".

A clamour for university autonomy is meaningless without academic freedom. The administrator's are vocal about autonomy but that gives them in decision-making but what the teachers want is academic freedom within the university. University autonomy without academic freedom would be a sham and could lead to serious

abuses. Thus, academic freedom is closely associated with the concept of university autonomy. The Dar Es Salam Declaration defines freedom as the right of the members of the academic community individually or collectively, to fulfill their functions of teaching researching writing learning exchanging and disseminating information and providing services without fear or interference from the state or any other public authority. Thus, academic freedom is the freedom of teachers, students, and academic institutions to pursue knowledge without undue interference.

Thus, universities are institutions of higher learning with autonomy to carry out its academic functions. It is generally applicable to the university community. Academic freedom has sometimes been defined as an important part of human rights. Academic freedom should be able to bring in new knowledge, new courses as well as promote free growth in any discipline. Moreover, academic freedom should ensure the right to inquire debate and research any given aspect of a discipline. Thus, university education promotes the free and fair growth of a discipline without being influenced by the prevailing social or political environment of a country by virtue of its academic freedom. An academic freedom is not simply a fundamental value. It is also a means by which higher education fulfills its mission to the various constituencies and stakeholders. Freedom is both a right and a duty.

A few of the academics misinterpret academic freedom as an opportunity to maximize private income and thereby avoid the main responsibility entrusted to them vis a vis, the teaching/learning process, contact with students, mentoring students, curriculum development, postgraduate learning and short term programs. Many of the problems in the universities have arisen due to missed opportunities for students to remain in close contact with academics during their semesters.

In reality, these concepts are not evidenced holistically. What is practiced is the granting of varying degrees of autonomy and academic freedom at different times and different places. When the university is entirely publicly funded, there is a feeling that it needs to be accountable to the government or state. The conflict between autonomy and accountability is one of the flashpoints of controversy in recent years. Without exception, autonomy has been limited and new administrative structures have been put into place in such countries as Britain and the Netherlands to ensure greater accountability. The areas considered

appropriate for institutional autonomy and academic freedom are selection of staff, selection of students, control of curricular and academic standards, acceptance of research programmes, internal allocation of funds and generation of its own funds. In this context, it is necessary to examine some key terminology such as market responsiveness and curriculum development.

Market Responsiveness and Curricula Development

The market is defined by the intersection of the demand by the supply for a service or a product. The market therefore, is the graduate passing out from the government universities as the supplier and the employer seeking graduates for jobs is on the demand side. As it happens often, the demand is not met with the supply and the supply is not met by the demand even in the case of higher education. Because of this mismatch, the unsatisfied demand is filled with either in house training or graduates with foreign degrees or equivalent. A majority on the supply side continues unabated with their own assumptions of values and resistance to reforms.

Taking a closer look at the market there are several important segments we should be catering for. Firstly, the rising demand for technically oriented jobs needs to be filled with skilled graduates. These are broadly the scientists, doctors, engineers, managers, and accountants. Each of these broad categories is involved in the ever-increasing manufacturing, service and agriculture sectors. The supply should therefore, be concomitantly adjusted while the curricula should also be responsive to the needs of the markets. Secondly, the other jobs for which most graduates are recruited are professions such as teaching and government services. Any intervention in these sectors has implications on the economic growth of the country. Thirdly, the country needs to add value to the economy by carrying out the routines of higher education, exploring, and implementing the options of innovations. We need research in the country's main economic sectors of industry, agriculture and the services that are technically sound and innovative so that new information and technology promotes growth in these sectors. Current research provided by our institutions is mostly of a testing nature whereas the emphasis should be on the innovation of technology for greater value addition to our local resources.

Responding to the demand factors with appropriate supplies is being responsive. Appropriately, it means to meet the demand with the service of products that

match the expectations of the consumer. Expectations are embedded with elements of value propositions such as graduate attributes, relationships, and image.

Curriculum development and research in the academic institutions thus become critical for the sustainability of the degree programs, for the survival of universities and the employers and in turn the economy of the country. These inter-linkages are the most critical issues in higher education where the economic development depends on the responsiveness of the academic establishment to the needs of the market. The traditional methods of giving a full set of notes find no place in a competitive environment. It has proven to produce incompetent graduates unable to meet the innovative challenges that demand a good learning process to address issues connected with problems encountered in doing business or work. Currently, universities are compelled to change liberal non-vocational studies to vocational curricular and forge close relationships with the industry. In some countries such as Sweden, representatives of the industry are added to the governing councils of universities. The nexus between the changing model and characteristics of the university shall be examined in the context of university education in Sri Lanka.

Case in Sri Lanka

The establishment of the University of Ceylon in 1942 was the beginning of university education in Sri Lanka. The University was based on the ox-bridge or elite model. It was an autonomous institution with academic freedom. The establishment of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and Kelaniya by upgrading two leading Buddhist Perivenas in 1959 paved the way for a university that is a mixture of the elite and indigenous model. At present, the universities in Sri Lanka are at the threshold of the mass model. The new universities that evolved from affiliated universities are an apt example. Although, university education functioned based on free education, it ensures the right of selection of staff, selection of students and control of curricula. Currently, the Sri Lankan university system consists of fourteen conventional universities, three campuses along with one Open University under the purview of the University Grants Commission

(UGC). The universities are spread throughout the country with the enrolment of about 70,000 internal students at present. The Open University has registered about 30,000 students while about 2, 40,000 are registered as external students at eleven universities. There are about 50,000 students enrolled in 60 to 70 cross border institutes established with the approval of the Board of Investment (BOI) in the country. Thus, annually 80,000 students enroll for higher education in different forms and modes. As a result, the Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) of Sri Lanka is estimated at 16 % -the highest in South Asia. With the expansion of higher education, the government intervened to regulate and coordinate university education through the Higher Education Act No 20 in 1966. This act created the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE). The Vice Chancellor became an appointee of the Minister of Higher Education. The University Act No 1 of 1972 consolidated government control over universities.

The University Act No 16 of 1978 established the University Grants Commission and Appeals Board. The main functions of the UGC are planning and coordination in keeping with national policy, regulation of administration, maintenance of standards, and distribution of state funds and control of expenditure. The President is empowered to appoint and remove Vice Chancellors in consultation with the Ministry of Higher Education and the UGC.

Due to the financial support and accountability to the public, the government through several regulatory agencies and other institutions closely monitors the universities in Sri Lanka. They are as follows: the Ministry of Education, University Grants Commission, University Services Appeals Board, the Auditor General, the Parliamentary Consultative Committee, the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE), and the Treasury. Due to the politicization of higher education and the institutionalized nature of the youth led insurrections in Sri Lanka outside organizations via the student unions strongly impinge on the autonomous and academic freedom of university education.

Currents Trends

One of the pressing challenges facing the universities in Sri Lanka is the need to introduce reforms to meet the changing needs of the current world scenario. The World Bank has provided financial support to transform the university system to a market oriented system. The changes are (a) in the curricula and structural changes of the degree programs; (b) introduction of novel courses and

multidisciplinary programs; (c) extensive use of modern teaching methodologies particularly use of IT; (d) effective staff development programs; (e) promoting and strengthening research activities; (f) building linkages with centers of excellence; (g) performance evaluation of individual staff, faculties and departments and (h) upgrading facilities in priority disciplines.

However, amongst the fifteen universities and three campuses established in Sri Lanka a few established universities have the potential ability to introduce new approaches to learning and teaching. The older and established universities that are in existence for over three decades are often reluctant to change and the changes that do take place are slow and difficult to accomplish. There are several reasons for such attitudes. The first is the profile of the academics that is mainly molded on the British traditions. Secondly, the lack of resources to facilitate effective change and lastly the deficiencies in organized staff development strategies that are geared to the latest development in Human Resources Development.

However, some faculties within universities in Sri Lanka assign priority to life skills development enabling their graduates to face challenges in market forces and in employment. The curriculum of the said few universities are relevant to the demands of the market forces, and so are career guidance, skills development, and knowledge management. Those universities are able to deliver courses of value addition to the local resource base.

Despite the efforts taken by newly, established universities the match between the market needs and the type of graduate produced are found to be far apart. Therefore, several measures have been experimented in isolation to narrow the gap that exists between the graduates produced through the university system with that of academic freedom and the current employment needs of the country. One such experiment has been the system of Open and Distant Learning (ODL) programmes with the advent of ICT. What is evident from the ODL modes of learning has been pressure from the students and staff for conventional universities. Similarly, private higher education institutions affiliated to foreign universities are already in operation in the country offering a variety of degree programmes in demanding fields. These institutions are however, registered under the Companies Act and the Board of Investment (BOI) and operate as commercial organizations than universities. Therefore, striking a balance between

academic freedom and market responsive curricula has become a major challenge faced by the universities in Sri Lanka.

Another major constraint in Sri Lanka is the resistance offered to change due to the politicization of university education and its critical link to insurrectionary violence in the country. Unlike the other South Asian countries Sri Lanka has, a history of youth led political violence that is largely attributed to the expansion of education particularly the higher education sector and a lack of concomitant expansion and changes in the economy to absorb the educated youth. Therefore, policies and changes in higher education are issues that need to be well planned and executed in the context of the country's social and political trends.

Conclusion

The classical model of the university is changing globally in terms of structure and policy. What is evident from the experience of the university system in Sri Lanka is that due to limitations or inability to keep pace with global changes the university system is subject to serious stress and strains especially in carving out its niche in the national development process. Universities face the threat of becoming obsolete or irrelevant institutions due to lack of resources or the effective use of resources, willingness to change and lack of global models that are adapted to the development goals and social structure of this country. We should not underestimate the contribution made by education especially higher education in social transformation and political stability.

The conclusion is that extensive reforms are needed to facilitate the development of our own model of a university that is not isolated from global trends. Piecemeal and cosmetic changes that are done by faculties or department in isolation have a marginal impact. What is needed are more insightful thinking, planning, and implementation that enhance accountability, efficiency, and academic effectiveness in order to establish the crucial link between global and regional university education. However, for this the social and political environment has to be conducive to change. A country challenged with two left-wing insurrections and a 30 year old secessionist war cannot make drastic changes in a system founded on the concept of free education for all. However, these are factors to be reckoned with in effecting change in the overall system so that we are not left behind in a rapidly changing country.