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Let us make our Universities a strategic partner and a catalyst of regional and national development

Universities as brains trusts in the country

In Sri Lanka there are 15 universities with an academic strength of around 4500, including about 500 Professors and Associate Professors and over 1750 Senior Lecturers with PhDs or equivalent qualifications. An appreciable number of these senior academics are promising scientists with international experience and make a significant contribution to the advancement and dissemination of knowledge in their respective fields. According to a study conducted by the National Science Foundation in 2004, the academics in the universities have accounted for more than 60% of the R & D personnel in the country.

In addition, there are over 60,000 undergraduates and over 4,000 post-graduate students in our universities who are pursuing studies in a multitude of faculties such as Engineering, Medicine, Dentistry, Veterinary Science, Natural Science, Agriculture, Humanities, Social Science, Management, and Law. Only about 2% of the students receiving school education in our country have the privilege of entering university. Thus these students undoubtedly constitute the distilled spirit of the youth of the country.

Presently, a sum exceeding Rs 20,000 million or Rs 20 billion is spent annually on higher education in our country. To produce a graduate, the Government expends typically around Rs. 500,000, or more, depending on the degree programme, university etc. In addition, to provide school education from year 1 – 13, though we call it “free” education, a substantial amount of public funds is spent. As the Nobel Laureate Milton Friedman said “There is no such thing as a free lunch”, and somebody is paying for it. In regard to education, it is supported by the sweat, toil and labour of the common man. Therefore it is incumbent upon the university community including its students to cultivate a deep sense of civic consciousness and reciprocate by providing a tangible service to the community and society. With at least one university being situated in each province, universities are in a unique position to become true and effective partners in national development by mobilizing and channelling their rich intellectual and infrastructure resources for regional development.

From aloofness to engagement with community

In societies where universities are public institutions, serving the public interest through outreach activities is legitimate and necessary. Governments in many parts of the world are now pushing public funded universities for “value for money”. Industry and the world of work look for skilled graduates, while society and the community desire thoughtful and knowledgeable leadership and

reflective professional support from graduates. Various stakeholders demand skills, knowledge and the ability to apply what is learned to the good of the society and themselves. To meet such demands, universities should be fully and explicitly engaged, not only in teaching and research partnerships, but also in outreach activities to meet society's intellectual, social, economic, environmental, spiritual and cultural needs.

In Sri Lanka, a substantial proportion of the population is still living in rural areas without basic amenities and services. There exist a wealth of dormant forces, faculties and talents in rural areas which need to be harnessed and channelled for rural development. As Abdul Kalam said, young minds that have been ignited are the most powerful resource. This resource is mightier than any other resource on earth, in the sky and under the sea. The twenty million minds of our nation are indeed a great power waiting to be tapped! There are many youths in rural areas bubbling with creativity and enthusiasm. Their trapped energies and suppressed initiatives need to be liberated and harnessed. Only a burning candle can light another candle. What a great responsibility and a moral obligation the intellectuals and professionals of this country have in this crucial hour to ignite the dormant inner energy of the youth in rural areas and guide this tremendous energy in a constructive manner for nation building! Any attempt to make Sri Lanka a developed country should address these in the rural sector, empowering its people. Rural development is an essential need for transforming Sri Lanka into a knowledge economy.

Therefore it is imperative for universities and higher education institutions to be actively involved with the society of which they are part. It is time that universities embrace engagement with wider society not as an adjunct to, but as a *sine qua non* of, their central purposes. Hence engagement should be considered as a “core value” for the university, which can no longer keep aloof from society. Universities need to get to the bottom of issues faced by society and community concerning livelihood, disease, poverty, illiteracy, agriculture, industry, productivity, education, environment etc. and find acceptable solutions to them. In order to achieve this, the engagement must embrace a great deal more than just “links” to the “outside world”. It should be a truly organic relationship, like that between mother and child or husband and wife.

Here, our scientists should become civic scientists and contribute towards societal transformation. In this new capacity, scientists should step beyond their campuses, laboratories and institutes and move into the centre of their communities to engage in active dialogue and action with their fellow citizens. They should ask themselves the question of how their knowledge can make an impact on the common man's life. Our academics should become fearlessly people-friendly, have a positive attitude, and provide a responsive and proactive service to the people. In other words, they should become practical academics or “pracademics”.

The Sagara Wishva Vidyalaya, established by His Excellency the President when he was the Minister of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, is based on the philosophy that it should cater to the trained manpower needs of the fisheries and allied sectors and help those engaged in these sectors to improve their living standards and social status. Thus serving the fisheries community, industry and other related stakeholders are clearly embedded in its mission and prominently reflected in its academic and vocational courses.

Why engagement with community?

The opportunity to serve the community and society is a privilege and an honour. George Bernard Shaw said, “My life belongs to the community, and as long as I live, it is my privilege to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work, the more I live. Life is no brief candle to me. It is a sort of splendid torch which I have for only a moment, and I want it to burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations”.

Greatness of a university is measured by the contribution of members of its community to society, country, and the world at large. Former President of Cornell University, USA, Frank Rhodes said, “Without community, knowledge becomes idiosyncratic: the lone learner, studying in isolation, is vulnerable to narrowness, dogmatism, and untested assumptions, and learning misses out on being expansive and informed, contested by opposing interpretations, leavened by differing experience, and refined by alternative view points. Without community, personal discovery is limited, not because the individual inquirer is less creative or original than the group, but because his or her conclusions remain unchallenged and untested; private knowledge is knowledge lost”. Plato reminded us that “even those who scale the pinnacles of learning must not make the mistake of continuing to live in a rarefied atmosphere. They must descend again among the average citizenry and partake of their labours. Then only would they be justifying the years of special training and effort that have gone into their education”.

Muhammad Yunus, with a doctorate from a renowned university in the USA, has been teaching elegant theories of Economics in a university in Bangladesh. Then he began to question the purpose of teaching such high-level economic theories, which were of little relevance to the community specially when the people in the immediate neighbourhood of the university were severely malnourished, reduced to “walking skeletons” and waiting to die. Then Yunus went into the community and was surprised to learn that a small amount of financial support could make a world of difference in the lives of the poor. This led to the introduction of a scheme to provide micro-credit, without collateral, to the entrepreneurial poor. This brought about a formidable change in the income and living standards of the rural folk. It finally gave birth to the Grameen Bank, which earned Yunus the Nobel Peace Prize in 2006.

In many parts of the world, universities have now become powerful catalysts and agents of growth and wealth creators. They mobilize and channel their intellectual and infrastructure resources for industrial growth and regional and national development. Thus great cities naturally have great universities that contribute to the cities’ intellectual, social and cultural vibrancy as well as influence their development. In a knowledge-based global economy, there is even greater synergy between a city’s development and the university’s. Stanford University in California, Punjab University in Punjab, India, Fudan University in Shanghai, China, Chalmers University in Gothenberg, Sweden and NUS in Singapore are some telling examples in this regard.

The rural folk are ready to contribute their might in the journey of transformation of our country into a developed nation. We have in the community, many talented and versatile people who have not had formal education. But they have worked in the laboratories of life. They are not

funded by the Government like we are, but they use their own energy, their own creativity, their own enterprise and their own money to innovate. They are not formally trained in scientific analysis, but their powers of observation, analysis and synthesis are no less than those of formally trained scientists. They do not import concepts from the western world, but generate their own ideas and innovations from the grassroots.

Therefore, it will be mutually beneficial and reinforcing for the universities to be engaged with the community. However, with a very few exceptions, the universities in our country still remain as “ivory towers” or “isolated academic islands”, and continue with their traditional teaching and research. Consequently, barring the graduates produced, the services rendered by them to the community are woefully inadequate. Given the profound impact the universities could make on the community, society and the country at large, they should no longer remain as ivory towers, but should descend from them and contribute towards improving the lives of rural folk whose sweat, labour and toil contribute in no small measure to the sustenance of the universities in our country.

Therefore, it is incumbent upon the universities to develop an organic partnership with the community and evolve a mechanism and an action plan to unleash the latent talents and creative energies of the rural youth and harness the under-utilized and unutilized human and natural resources in rural areas for the benefit of our nation and our country.

How can our universities build organic relationship with community?

Building an organic relationship with communities requires not only re-creating and re-positioning our universities, but also re-modelling the degree programmes so that they incorporate engagement with community as a core value and an integral part of university education and research. Firstly, it is necessary to create an enabling environment for community engagement. Here, the formulation of appropriate policies recognizing community service as a prime function of the university becomes a *sine qua non*. Then putting in place the appropriate institutional structures, systems, processes and programmes is essential in creating and sustaining an ambience conducive to engagement with community. Here, the academic staff need to facilitate, direct and guide community work that should be well integrated with the academic objectives and research endeavours of the university.

There are some staff members in the universities who are already constructively engaged with the community and are making a significant contribution to community development. However, a sizeable proportion of the academic and administrative staff of universities still believe that community service is only a token or a subsidiary objective of the university and that financial resources should not be allocated for such activities. Some still believe that universities should remain as elite institutions and should not get involved with the grassroots. Therefore a change of mind-set across the board also becomes critically important for the engagement with community to be successful. In addition, community problems are multifaceted and demand a multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary approach, but universities still work mainly along disciplinary lines with hardly any team work across disciplinary boundaries. Therefore in order to ensure an effective community engagement, instead of rigid boundaries between the departments and faculties, we need to create “porous and permeable” boundaries providing for free diffusion of

ideas, talents, and resources across departments and faculties. These are some challenges that we will face in internalizing and institutionalizing engagement with community.

For the engagement to be effective and impactful, it should be embedded in the mission of the university, and should be reflected in the responsibilities entrusted to the academic staff, in rewards and encouragement awards schemes (i.e. to felicitate the most outstanding community service provider), in career structure, recruitment and promotion criteria, learning experience of students, and in the nature of relationships with external organizations. Introduction of mandatory credit-bearing courses and assignments related to community service and development proves important in getting students involved in ‘service to community’ and ‘academic citizenship’. It should be stressed that outreach activities should never be treated as merely a service function of the university, but as an integral part of the university’s responsibility to the community.

Moreover, for effective engagement, the degree programmes should be modelled on an “apprenticeship” approach that applies classroom learning through actual practice. Just as medical students must spend time in hospital wards and surgery units to become skilled doctors, other undergraduates should work in relevant government institutions, community organizations and such like to gain the firsthand knowledge, hands-on experience and practical skills to become effective professionals. Graduates produced through such degree programmes will be prepared to live with the local community, to listen and learn from them, help them in solving their problems and developing and executing plans. Such graduates could guide them towards self-reliance through the process of social mobilization, capacity building, capital formation, transfer of technology, skills enhancement, productive linkages, and so on.

Engagement with the community can be further facilitated and augmented through the establishment of community service centres in the villages connected to the university through ICT. Students and teachers could live, study, teach, train, work and learn at these centres with the villagers. This will help both the staff and students understand not only the day-to-day problems, thinking, attitudes, needs, hopes and aspirations of the villagers, but also the social, cultural and political landscape of the community. This proves very important in finding acceptable solutions to the problems of the villagers.

Building Sarasavi villages

Most of our universities have Faculties of Arts, Management and Science. Some have in addition Faculties of Medicine, Engineering, Agriculture and other disciplines. These Faculties can select a disadvantaged village or two in their respective regions, which can serve as field laboratories for the staff and students; they can, through their specialized knowledge, add value to the endeavours of the villagers. They can apply their knowledge, skills and experience in finding solutions to the problems faced by the villagers, improving their sanitation, hygiene, health, nutrition, livelihood, environment and social status.

This will help build model villages which can produce a ripple effect. The knowledge and experience gained and lessons learnt in building such villages can be shared across the universities, and applied elsewhere with suitable modification. In addition, the university staff

and students could be a strategic partner in several key development initiatives recently launched such as *Pura Neguma, Divi Neguma, Gama Naguma etc.* contributing to their success.

Such constructive engagement of students with the community will result in a blending of knowledge and practice, which will contribute in no small measure in producing well rounded and well grounded graduates, who will be highly valued by the employers. The wealth of knowledge and experience gained through such engagement would enable the universities to offer very useful courses related to Rural Development. Therefore community engagement, besides making graduates more employable, will enable them to contribute positively to the development process, facilitating the transformation of Sri Lanka into a developed country. Thus the engagement with community would afford a new meaning, new direction and new momentum to higher education, making the universities in Sri Lanka true and effective partners and catalysts in regional and national development.

Towards a developed nation

Development is a process, and it cannot be imported like goods or services. Therefore in finding solutions to our provincial and national issues, we should not borrow models from developed countries such as Japan, USA, UK or Singapore. Knocking at others' door will be futile and counterproductive. Instead of importing theories and transplanting concepts, we need to work out our own solutions. We need to find home-grown answers, homespun solutions to our local issues. Here we need heavily to depend on our capacity for building our own intellectual assets. These include upstream scientific and technological discoveries, midstream development of innovative products, processes and services, and downstream commercialization of the discoveries and innovations in the regional and global markets. Therefore it needs to be emphasized that university academics must continue and enhance their cutting edge research related to local context in order to become effective in community and regional development.

The universities with their rich and diverse intellectual and infrastructure resource base, coupled with an army of over 60,000 dynamic and resourceful students, could become powerful catalysts of national development in a knowledge economy. However, this enviable human resource base in the universities has so far remained untapped or heavily under-exploited. If it is properly mobilized and channelled for regional development, the universities can become the locomotives of regional growth and effective partners in transforming Sri Lanka into a developed nation. It behoves the university authorities to make appropriate interventions at this crucial hour. The earlier it happens, the better.

Dear graduates, I would like to remind you that the public funds that sustain the seats of higher learning have contributed to your education and to your achievements. Thus you have a moral obligation and an inescapable responsibility to give something tangible back to your society, to your nation, to your country, which enabled you to become what you are today. Therefore wherever you are going to be and whatever you are going to do, please nurture a deep sense of national commitment uppermost in your mind. I wish you all a bright, rewarding and prosperous future!

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