

Leading the Children in Sri Lanka to Right Choice of Education

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Note:

This article is a brief communication of the original research presently being conducted by the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences of CINEC Campus. The author believes this will be useful to many researchers, and will undoubtedly stimulate further research in the field of education. Following the norms of research writing, some experimental details haven't been incorporated in this briefing since the author is yet to publish a series of original research manuscripts.

Preamble

The University of Ceylon was established in 1942 by the Ceylon University Ordinance No. 20 of 1942. According to the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978, more Universities of independent identities were established but the state has been controlling them through the University Grants Commission (UGC). The amendments made to the University Act in 1999 allowed state Universities and private institutes to grant undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. It has been estimated approximately 300,000 students per sit for GCE A/L examination annually in the local streams and almost 180,000 obtain minimum entry qualification for tertiary University education. Nevertheless, only around 30,000 students are fortunate to enter a state University every year. The rest of the 150,000 students who can be considered as victims of circumstance are deprived of state University education. Although the government has allowed international schools to boom, the students who get through London G.C.E. (A/L) are not absorbed by the state University system.

As a result these students are compelled to continue their tertiary education overseas or at home spending a substantial amount of money every year. Sometimes it is pathetic to find a fair number of students qualified to follow degrees are totally deprived of tertiary education. The youth may consider this as unfair practice and gross discrimination. On the other hand a huge amount of foreign exchange is drained off on tuition fees and overseas accommodation. It's been estimated that more than 12 000 Sri Lankan students travel overseas annually to pursue their higher education. The calculations show the annual loss of foreign exchange amounts to more than \$ 50 million. Even if the students follow a degree awarded by a foreign university staying at home country, the foreign exchange is lost by way of royalty fees and other affiliation charges.

Psychological paradigm shift in students' demand and enrolment for various academic disciplines

Accelerating Higher Education Expansion and Development (AHEAD), Ministry of Higher Education in its objective of results area one, stresses to increase enrolment in higher education programs that are of strategic importance to economic development. Due to its vital importance, every institute of higher education is expected to pay undivided attention to it. According to the Employability Survey Report 2017 of Wayamba University of Sri Lanka (ESR – WUSL), the percentage of unemployed graduates in its 12 departments at the time of

the survey was 37. This situation should be seriously taken into consideration since these graduates have been unable to contribute to the economy not because of a fault of their own but due to an unrealistic education system. These statistics adequately prove that there is no return on investment from the most intelligent and qualified young talent of the country. Further, the quality of graduates as well as the acceptance in commercial establishments currently vary considerably. On one hand, the high-end graduates are nationally and globally employable, while others struggle to find suitable employment. These differences reflect sharp variations in the quality of programs and the socio-emotional skills (employability skills) of students. Although the Interest Free Loan Scheme (IFLS) is a strategic approach in this context, the limit of the loan facility (i.e. maximum Rs.200,000.00 per annum) hinder students choosing their most preferred study area for their degrees. Consequently, they will have to settle with the degrees offered at the minimum cost. The authorities concerned have been made aware of these particular circumstances in view of prompt solutions or alternatives.

The pending employability crisis requires the country to curb graduates in areas that has no potential employment opportunities. It can be argued that a graduate should be able to carry out any job better than a non-graduate and it is up to the commercial establishments to follow suit. However, employers always prefer to recruit undergraduates only from relevant disciplines. If the country produces more and more unemployed graduates, the ultimate impact to the economy and society will be unbearable. This will lead to critical repercussions unless a systematic approach is introduced through scientific researches.

In recent years more students have been able to enter tertiary education due to additional capacity created by the non-state universities and government's initiatives of IFLS through non state education institutes. In addition to the degree programs offered by foreign universities, non-state higher education institutes commenced diversified and futuristic degree programs approved by University Grants Commission and Ministry of Higher Education. However, it is evident from the available statistics that most of the students tend to select very common degree programs and the demand for innovative academic disciplines are very low. Most of the non-state Universities also cater to the present demand and only a very few institutes volunteer to conduct these new disciplines on experimental basis even at substantial financial losses. This trend will lead to heavy competition for graduate employment in the next few years unless the students in the future are properly guided in their selection of field in tertiary education. While the students entering state-Universities are compelled to settle with the decision of University Grants Commission based on the Z score, most of the other students who enter non-state sector seek advice from parents, siblings and schoolteachers. The present research on "Development of a mechanism that leads to a psychological paradigm shift in students' demand and enrolment for various academic disciplines in the tertiary education in Sri Lanka" is a project funded by the World Bank. It is carried out by the Faculty of Management and Social Sciences of CINEC Campus.

The Research Reconnoitres

The tertiary education in Sri Lanka is faced with two fundamental challenges. On one hand out of those passing the G.C.E. Advanced Level Examination only 17% enter Universities while 83% are left behind. Nearly 130,000 students annually are deprived of the opportunity to proceed with higher education due to the resource limitation. This means, during the last

40 years, millions of students in Sri Lanka have sacrificed their rights for education still without a sustainable solution. On the other hand, there is a higher unemployment rate of graduates in the country even after this competitive selection process. While those who are deprived of an opportunity to pursue their higher education despite them qualifying, their future is unwelcoming for no fault of theirs. As per reports by the Department of Census and Statistics, the highest unemployment rate (9.1%) is reported from the G.C.E. (A/L) & above group in Sri Lanka. It is 5.1 percent and 13.2 percent for male and female respectively, 2018. As at 2017, the total number of unemployed graduates in Sri Lanka was 34,316. Among the unemployed graduates, about 54 percent are Art degree holders while the other 46 percent consist with other degree holders. Considering the above background of tertiary education in Sri Lanka, the higher unemployment rate of graduate is not only a problem of theirs but also of others who have become victims of circumstances and sacrificed their lives in this unhealthy competition. It may cause problem to the tax payers who help the government provide the so-called free education in universities. The situation also affects their parents and other family members who contributed a major part of their lives to make them graduates.

The undergraduates who enter government Universities after a very competitive selection process in Sri Lanka are bound to be unemployed mainly due to mismatch of employers' requirements in the modern world and the skills and competence they have developed in the tertiary education. It is therefore timely, if not already late, to develop a mechanism that leads to a psychological paradigm shift in students' demand and enrolment for various academic disciplines in the tertiary education in Sri Lanka. There are a number of criticisms that the following of degree programs conducted in government universities do not result in creating a graduate that the commercial world demands in the present context. Therefore, it is high time that state Universities introduce degree programs in emerging fields so that non state Universities can also follow suit. Traditionally, there has been a tendency by students to prefer subject areas of degrees introduced in government universities. The reality of students' choice for higher education was evidenced in the recent IFLS that there is a higher demand for the common programs conducted by the state universities. It is however sad that the job opportunities for those common degree programs are low even in the current situation. Therefore, more students following similar programs could lead to a serious problem in the years to come and some remedy should be required as early as possible. The proposed psychological paradigm shift in students' demand and enrolment for various academic disciplines would be a sustainable solution to the above issues.

In one way, the contribution from the non-state higher education is emerging and these institutions will respond to the demand immediately and cater to the shifted paradigm. Therefore, this research will mainly question factors that lead to a psychological paradigm shift in students' demand and enrolment for various academic disciplines in the tertiary education in Sri Lanka. In most cases, the advice the students get about selecting the subject area are usually based on highly subjective parameters and mostly based on out-dated information. For example, a parent giving advice to his child to join a field that proved successful twenty years ago is not the ideal choice today. In fact, the present choice should enable students to make their life successful in the next 30 years to come. Therefore, guiding students in the right direction for their tertiary education is a timely need and becoming more important than ever before.

Implementation Perspective

The term “Customer” in tertiary education is different from that of manufacturing or other general service sector. The student uses the service offered by the education institute while the parents (in almost all cases in the Sri Lankan context) act as the “customer” who pays for the services provided by the institute. In the recent years more students have started entering tertiary education due to increased options available. In addition to the degree programs offered by foreign universities, non-state higher education institutes commenced diversified and marketable degree programs approved by University Grants commission and Ministry of Higher Education. Therefore, the number of graduates may increase significantly in the years to come. In addition, the IFLS students may enter new degree programs offered by non-state higher education institutes in various demanding disciplines if the limits of loan amounts are increased. The main concerns raised by CINEC in the recent policy paper is under the education project funded by the World Bank includes, inter alia, the need of vertical integration between schools and higher education institutes, review in the school curriculum, introduce more academic disciplines at tertiary level, and formal recognition of different skills of children rather than creating statutory boundaries that restrict their inborn talents. The vertical integration between schools and non-state higher education institutes/State universities develop formal links between schools and non-state higher education institutes/State universities to share knowledge. It also increases the awareness of the emerging areas that has more job opportunities and recognition. Introducing evolving new academic disciplines in the school curriculum in a systematic manner are also important since there is no formal mechanism to create awareness about global demand of job market to students. Their mindset is limited to traditional academic streams such as Medicine, Engineering, Accounting Human Resources, Business administration etc. This mindset needs a comprehensive transformation in order to expand the horizon of academic disciplines to students at tertiary level. It is practically impossible to facilitate new disciplines (or even increase the intake of handful of existing evolving disciplines due to capacity constraints. However, presently non state higher education institutes offer a wide range of programs under many disciplines but due to nature of the programs the tuition fees are relatively higher. It is also suggested, at the very beginning in the early childhood education and in schools, skills strategies should prioritize the formation of cognitive, behavioural and social skills of the students by applying different learning teaching practices for example, problem solving methods, cooperative learning, project method etc. Good cognitive and social and behavioural skills are essential for gaining and improving technical skills throughout life.

Conclusion

Education is not limited to acquisition of knowledge. Therefore, tertiary education should focus not only on knowledge in a specific area but also on the development of skills and competencies of the graduates. It has a direct influence and essentially deals with many indirect transformative processes. However, it can also be argued that educational processes and practices are influenced by social phenomena which are evident in every culture and nation. Moreover, education is vital for success in human endeavours and its impact on quality of life is boundless. In such a context, employability is a key concern and is in a state of flux linked not only with inventing and adapting to latest technology but also developing CSR strategies to promote democracy, gender equality and eliminate poverty in society. It is also important to note that the choice of higher education for a diversity of requirements is

usually influenced by peers, siblings, parents, and academic staff at secondary level, government, and employers. One critical issue faced by non-state universities is the non-funding by the government which make them find their own financial sources. As a result they are unable to offer a wide range of degree programs for students and limit themselves only to a few popular degree programs. The popular trend in line with commercial competition and global education practices may have produced more graduates in the society a few years ago. It is argued that there is no free education in Sri Lanka as claimed by some politicians because the state university education is facilitated by the taxpayers' money in the country making it come at a price to the society. Yet, the outcome has been unsuccessful as there are already considerable numbers of unemployed graduates in the country. The picketing carried out every other day display social unrest and the ultimate return on investment (ROI) to the taxpayers' money and the loans borrowed from other countries at higher interest rates to develop education sector. The economic impact of these issues is not difficult to understand. In conclusion, the witnessed failure is not the total fault of students but those who direct them to be graduated in such unemployable academic disciplines.