

Higher Education Policy in Sri Lanka: Implementation in State Universities

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Abstract: The present paper focuses on effectiveness of the Higher Education System in the research domain of Sri Lanka as a unit of analysis. The aim of this research paper is to explain and elaborate the system of Higher Education prevailed in the Island since its inception and how the colonial objectives have transformed to social demands and economic changes prevailed in Sri Lanka and how far Sri Lanka has succeeded to modernize the Higher Education policy with the aim of enhancing the efficiency of the system to fit into the globalized trend. Finally the research will serve as a base for the policy makers for possible changes at the appropriate stages to be addressed or adopted.

Key words: Higher Education System, Free Education Scheme, Colonial Objectives, Effectiveness, Higher Education Policy, Oxbridge Model, Redbrick Model.

I. INTRODUCTION

Higher Education is the central to the creation of a knowledge based society, and the development of a country depends primarily on its ability to produce and make use of knowledge for development. In other words, knowledge is becoming the core of a country's competitive advantage, and the production and the dissemination of knowledge are parts of the process of development based on an effective Higher Education Policy.

Higher Education, in the context of the current developments in Sri Lanka, is of paramount importance for economic and social development.

II. HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE COLONIAL RULE IN SRI LANKA

Higher education in Sri Lanka has been based on the several prominent Pirivenas (Ancient Buddhist Monks Training Centres) during the local Kingdoms. The origins of the modern university system in Sri Lanka dates back to 1921 when a University College, the Ceylon University College was established at the former premises of Royal College Colombo affiliated to the University of London. However, the begin of modern higher education in Ceylon was in 1870 when the Ceylon Medical School was established followed by Colombo Law College (1875), School of Agriculture (1884) and the Government Technical College (1893).

Tertiary Education system in Sri Lanka, which consists of seventeen universities, nine Institutes and seven Post-Graduate institutes, began formally in 1921 with the establishment of colonial-oriented University College, which was later elevated to the fully fledged University in 1942.

The University of Ceylon, which came existence in 1942 remained in Colombo more than a decade, and began to dominate the system of higher education in the country till the end of the sixties.

Both these institutions- the University College (1921) and the University of Ceylon (1942) functioned as elite institutions, catering to a limited number of students, and it restricted its intake of students because they were expected to adhere to colonial objectives of education. The University College (1921) was very much of a colonial institution and it functioned on the basis of the colonial objectives of providing limited higher educational opportunities. The University of Ceylon was modelled on the Oxbridge formula, at

its inception accommodated only 904 students, which later expanded to cover a number of universities and it remained as an elite oriented university as stated by Sir Ivor Jennings, catered to a small number of students and exclusively residential.

The major objective of the system of education established by the Colonial authorities of the period was for the creation of English - speaking Christian class from whom the personnel for the public services and other positions of authority in the colonial administration could be recruited.¹ In order to administer the empire, the British, the colonial masters, had to educate a native class of Ceylonese; British acted similarly in India where they wanted to educate a native class of Indians for the same purpose. Lord Macaulay, in his famous minute on Education, stated that the British should create an English-speaking native middle class 'who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinion, in morals and intellect.'²

It was this philosophy which guided the British policy in the sphere of education in the colonies, and the educational policy in Ceylon came to be built on this principle which, from the beginning, aimed at the creation of elite capable of building the British types of institutions of good government.

III. FREE EDUCATION SCHEME

Since 1945, Sri Lanka has been enjoying what is called the Free Education Scheme, under which Education is free from primary onwards until one obtains a first degree from a University. This became an integral part of social welfare system and though a massive burden on the Sri Lankan State, it is still continued because it is part and parcel of the political culture of the country. Apart from that it still offers opportunities to rural children who otherwise may not find access to both secondary and higher education.

Sri Lanka on the basis of social welfare oriented scheme of education, has constructed what is called the Social Demand Model of Education, through which the country has been modernized in a wide variety of ways. The free education scheme made a tremendous impact on the social, economic and political developments in the country. On top of it Sri Lanka has achieved the highest literacy rate in South Asia and overall, one of the highest literacy rates in Asia. Sri Lanka can be proud of such achievements as universal primary enrolment, equality of educational opportunity and near gender equality.

Amidst such achievements, differences in income produce differences in family and social environments considerably reducing the opportunities of socially disadvantaged children who are unable to enter the universities. Though most of the students who enter the universities come from rural areas and lower economic backgrounds, there are many socially disadvantaged children, who are not provided with adequate primary and secondary educational facilities, cannot enter the higher education system. Though the accepted norm is that children with higher economic background are more likely to enter a university, the situation is entirely different in Sri Lanka, as a majority of students came from rural areas. This kind of pattern was discovered in England in 1963 through the Robbins Report, the 'Redbrick' formula which brought about an impressive change in Britain whereas in Sri Lanka, the historic Free Education Scheme altered the relative percentage of economic class entering the universities.

IV. EXPANSION OF THE SYSTEM OF UNIVERSITY EDUCATION

The system of University education in Sri Lanka, which came to be built on the ideas and ideals of Sir Ivor Jennings, have 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.

In addition to the introduction of the Free Education Scheme, there were two other important developments which directly demanded an expansion of university education in the country. The medium of instruction was changed from English to Swabasha- both Sinhalese and Tamil and the students educated in the national languages began to enter the University of Ceylon in 1960; the next important factor was the take-over of denominational schools in 1962.

¹ Peries, Ral 1ph. Universities, Politics and Public Opinion in Ceylon, in Minerva, Summer, 1964, pp. 435-454.

² Cited by Deepak Lal, in Praise of Empire, 73-74

These developments, as expected, demanded an expansion of the intake of students, and the unitary residential university, which still remained elitist, had to face a massive challenge to its existence as an exclusive institution catering to a limited number of students. Therefore the forces, both nationalist and political, demanded unlimited extension of university education, and the purpose was to provide opportunities to the large number of students, who, due to the expansion of the network of secondary schools and the change in the medium of instruction, aspired to get into socially esteemed jobs with a higher educational qualification.

The beginning of an expansion university education took place with the conversion of the two leading Buddhist centres of learning into universities in 1959, and with the creation of two more universities, the University of Ceylon lost its monopoly over university education.

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, and nation has moved in order to accommodate the 'Redbrick' model. It was on the basis of this formula that Sri Lanka established provincial Universities to expand the opportunities for higher education. The expansion of the universities led to the policy-makers being compelled to concentrate on undergraduate education at the expense of post graduate education.

More emphasis was laid on Humanities and Social Sciences - the expansion of such sectors took place as part of the enlarged role of the state in the field of Higher Education. This kind of higher education was not accompanied with a corresponding expansion of professional and technical education.

Though the university system expanded during this period, the demand for university places was such that the system could not satisfy it as additional opportunities had not been created. There was no coordination between the policies on secondary education and higher education, and this lack of understanding between the two sectors on their immediate priorities created problems within the area of admission policy.

V. ESTABLISHMENT OF UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION

The expansion of the system of university education, in addition to the growth in the number of universities, brought into existence a federal system of university education which demanded the establishment of University Grant Commission. The UGC in Sri Lanka came into existence in 1978 and entrusted with the task of administering the admission of Universities. In Sri Lanka, university admissions are a very sensitive issue and it creates political sensitiveness as well.

The UGC functions today as the apex body of within the structure of the Universities – which now expanded into a large and complex organization. The Universities Act, No.16 of 1978, stipulated the power of University Grant Commission; it, as the apex body, was entrusted with the power of coordinate, regulate, promote, and assist in the progress and development of Universities and Institutes coming under its purview. Since 1990s, it has been entrusted with the following tasks:

1. To expand, reform and restructure the entire system.
2. To find ways and means to accommodate the increasing number.
3. To improve the quality and relevance of University education.

VI. CONCLUSION

The establishment of new universities, though done in response to economic and social changes, followed a certain pattern, were expected to break away from the traditional mould of the University of Ceylon founded in 1942, and adopt a curriculum with which an employable graduate could be produced.

It was with this change that the dominant position of the traditional disciplines, which dominated the curriculum for more than five decades, began to crumble, paving the way for introduction of courses with more economic and social relevance.

Higher Education has become a competitive enterprise, and the transformations taking place in the world is unprecedented in its scope and diversity. The Sri Lankan system of Higher education had to adjust itself to meet the challenges that have emerged as a result of national and global factors.

Though there is a comprehensive system of higher education, consisting of a network of State funded Universities and a set of private providers functioning on an adhoc basis, the system does not operate in the form of an inclusive system providing opportunities for higher education to all young men and women who aspire to get into the system through a highly competitive entrance examination. This means that educational policies and strategies in the area of Higher education have to be changed with a view to developing a workforce for the 21st century. In other words, the concept of employability needs to guide the policies and changes in the sphere of Higher Education and the immediate need is to enter into mutually beneficial international partnership.

It is the common belief that the traditional conventional universities, with its traditional disciplines, is not what the country requires at this juncture; the country needs a set of universities which could specialize on courses of studies that are immediately relevant economic development.

This was the basis of the development-oriented since 1994, and innovative policies are now required to get these institutions of higher learning to fall in line with global expectations. The Sri Lankan system of Higher Education, based on a rich historical tradition, could be reformed with proper development-oriented policy initiative, utilizing existing system to contribute to both development and changes on the basis of both local and global considerations.

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