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Essay

Observed Trends in the Higher Education Sector in Sri Lanka and Those Seen in Other Regions in Asia, Europe and America: A comparative Global Perspective

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Abstract

The literacy rate of Sri Lanka is at 92%, and it has the highest literacy rate in South Asia. In the past, higher education was provided through the Pirivenas, and then in 1921, Ceylon University College was established, which was the first step towards the modern university system in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka continues to struggle with challenges in higher education which include low admission to state universities which is about 26%, few available private vocational schools, and an increasing need for greater diversification and privatization. Some of the most notable trends in higher education in the world, including Sri Lanka, is the use of technology in education like e-learning and MOOCS which reduces inequalities in the education system. Due to the lack of funding from the government sector for higher education, there is a growing shift towards privatization and commercialization. Collaboration between universities and industries is on the rise and aims to integrate the curriculum with real world problems to enhance the skills. However, many issues remain where education is not relevant to the job market, weak research productivity from universities, and not having enough qualified staffs because of better employment options abroad. There have been steps towards gender equity, but issues such as ragging and politics among students further impede development in higher education. Sri Lanka must address these issues to meet the global standards by adopting innovative polices, equitable access to education, and international partnership and collaborations.

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1. Introduction

The literacy rate of Sri Lanka is 92%, which is the highest literacy rate in South Asia. Modern education system was introduced to Sri Lanka during British rule. During the earlier periods Privenas were the places that provided Higher education in Sri Lanka. The modern university system was established in Sri Lanka in 1921 with the establishment of University College, the Ceylon University College (Ministry of Higher Education and Highway, 2024). Higher education is a sector that experiences consistent changes worldwide to ensure sustainable growth and development. There are many new trends in Higher education (Sinnathamby, 2009).

2. Major Trends in Higher Education

2.1. Diversification of Higher Education

Diversification of Higher education is a major trend. The structure of the universities is encouraged to be changed and delivery modes of the higher education system has also changed. There are conventional universities, open universities, virtual universities, distance learning, dual degree programs etc. After the second world war in the USA, the demand for higher education increased and to improve the quality and the economy of the country many changes were made in

higher education. European countries like Germany, France, Sweden, Italy and the UK supported universities to increase admissions and expand higher education. The development of higher education had a great impact on the economy, politics and sociocultural factors of those countries. East Asian countries identified the need for an efficient work force and wanted to increase science and technology education which can support the economy of the country (Sinnathamby, 2009).

2.2. Privatization of Higher Education

Second trend is the privatization of higher education. Two trillion dollars are spent on higher education annually. The private sector has established their influence in higher education since the 1960s. UNESCO has expressed their view in the involvement of the private sector in higher education. It accepts that due to the increased demand for higher education, the participation of the private sector is needed to meet those demands. The governments are unable to allocate resources for higher education, so private finance is compulsory. Another trend is the corporatization and commercialization of higher education. Higher education institutions are establishing partnerships with other institutions around the world. The government funding for many universities have been reduced recently leading to search for markets for their programs. Policies are made in promoting partnership with other organizations to maintain the quality (Sinnathamby, 2009). Currently there are 15 state universities and a very lower percentage of the students (around 26%) get the admission to the state universities and a very small amount of the population get into private or vocational institutes or foreign universities etc. (National Human Resources Development Council, Sri Lanka, 2022).

2.3. Integration of Technology in Higher Education

Integration of technology into higher education is another important trend. The introduction of innovative tools, multimedia learning resources, online assessments, interactive activities have made higher education more attractive than traditional methods of teaching. The needs of the intellectual environment are changing, the introduction of Information and communication technology into higher education is catering those needs. Creation of Digital libraries has enabled the students, teachers and other stakeholders to access the digital resources at any time anywhere (Sinnathamby, 2009; Jazeel and Saravanakumar, 2019). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and lifelong learning have developed to bridge the educational gaps especially in remote areas. This approach of higher education is addressing the educational inequalities in the country. Due to the integration of technology, higher education has become convenient and affordable for the students (Weerasinghe, Munasinghe and Suraweera, 2024). According to several studies, the Asian region is showing a continuous growth in higher education in E- Learning with the evolution of technology. Another trend in higher education is the micro-credentials and badges. These are earned online. These give students specific skill acquisition even faster than the traditional program (Kato, Galán-Muros and Weko, 2020). European and American institutions were already ready for the movement to online education because most had already started the use of technology in teaching and learning processes (Koptelov and Turner, 2021).

3. Challenges in Higher Education

3.1. Mismatch Between Education and Labor Market

One of the criticisms for the state universities is the irrelevance of education and the labour market. Except for some of the areas like medicine, engineering etc, there was a mismatch between skills required by the labour market and the education provided by the universities. The recent reforms by the ministry and University grant commission has reduced this mismatch to a great extent through quality assurance (Wickramasinghe, 2018).

3.2. Lack of Academic Professionals

Lack of academic professions in the country. The recruitment of qualified academic staff is challenging due to the better salaries offered by the private institutions and foreign employment opportunities. The vacancy rate has increased in universities. When we compare the public universities of the USA, the staff to faculty ratio and student to faculty ratio is the same in Sri Lanka. At the same time international research collaboration of the academic staff are low. The output of the research is also low. To face this challenge the University Grant Commission (UGC) has introduced competitive research grants (Ra and Song, 2018).

3.3. Gender Equity in Higher Education

Gender equity can be considered an important trend in higher education especially in Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka is a country which has developed a non discriminatory educational policy to promote gender equity. Previously most of the educated women were unemployed for a longer period or employed at lower positions and not given opportunities to enter into management positions. Many unemployed women were arts and law graduates. In other fields also the unemployment of the female predominated. The Sri Lankan government took steps to recruit graduates into the teaching profession when graduate unemployment became a threat to social order, reducing the unemployment among the graduates and promoting equity (Gunawardena, 2003). When we compare the gender equity in higher education, we can see a slow progress in the South Asian countries (Liyanage, 2014).

3.4. Ragging and Violence in Universities

In Sri Lankan public universities especially ragging or hazing has emerged as one of the significant types of violence where other types of violence in society have been reflected. However, ragging is also participated by a limited number of female students. This issue is linked to political exercise and favoritism inside the university environment. Efforts to stop ragging have not been forceful; early in 1998, an anti-ragging act was passed after the ragging deaths of medical students. While universities boast of not permitting the practice, their commitment has not been consistent, most of the faculties having experienced some success with temporary cessation through measures and prevention. Consequently, ragging continues to be an important issue in the Sri Lankan context of higher learning education for which a sustained, collaborative, and collaborative response across different stakeholder domains continue to be needed for addressing the causes and effects of ragging on students' welfare and achievement (Perera, 2024).

3.5. Financial Constraints and Privatization

There were many issues and problems that emerged due to the new development of the new changes in higher education. The cultural shift in the education sector impacts the teachers, learners, and other partners of the higher education sector. Countries like Sri Lanka do not have the financial capability to establish technological infrastructure by investing large amounts of Money. Despite the increase in the budget for higher education, it is not enough. The government introduced a loan scheme for students who have passed G.C.E. Advanced Level but not able to get admitted to the state universities, to search for higher education. Due to the privatization of higher education, there is a confusion in who decides the policies related to higher education (Sinnathamby, 2009; Ra and Song, 2018).

3.6. Student Politics and Internal Conflicts

When it comes to Sri Lanka compared to other countries the student politics are influenced by the country's political parties. It is another barrier for the development of higher education in our country. At the same time there are internal conflicts among the students, academic staff and administration (Udayanga, 2020). The scheduled dates for new admission are postponed every year

due to trade union actions, other strikes etc. which delays every other process in higher education (Liyanage, 2014).

3.7. *World University Rankings*

World University ranking has become a concern for many universities in Sri Lanka. It is a measurement of the performance of the universities. However the university rankings do not always give accurate results regarding the performance of the higher educational institutions (Bandara et al, 2022).

3.8. *Neglect of Social Sciences and Humanities*

Another important trend in Higher education is the neglect of social sciences, liberal arts, humanities related areas. Social sciences education is very important for society as it has an impact on the harmony and ethical side of a society. Recent industrial growth and the government policies have focused on the development of science and technology related education. To maintain the social order of society, human relationships, and emotional intelligence are needed. Despite its vital role in society the social sciences have been cornered by the modern higher education systems. The academics of social sciences unable to revise and adjust their curriculum to cater the market needs. As the adjustments to the curricula is difficult, new subjects are included into the existing curriculum which can promote some entrepreneurial qualities in the students (Udayanga, 2020).

3.9. *Staff Training and Development*

Staff training is another trend that has influenced higher education in Sri Lanka. In every university it is decided to establish Staff Training units to develop staff. It is decided to upgrade the skills of academic staff in English, presentation skills, assessment activities, computer literacy, general academic performance etc (Mookiah, 2002).

3.10. *University-Industry Collaboration*

The promotion of partnership between the Sri Lankan higher learning institutions and industry appears to be gaining momentum because of the realizing factor that the university-industry cooperation can work efficiently to develop innovations, upgrade skills, and realign the university curricula with market demands. The type of U-I collaborations provides a mechanism through which universities can directly contribute to the economic development agenda with positive gainers for universities in terms of receipt of funds and specific industrial sector for mutual benefits from shared inputs and projects. But there are obstacles still: the fact that the objectives of academics are generating new knowledge and the goals of business are gaining competitive advantage. Applied oriented research or innovation-based research is now emerging in Sri Lankan universities especially in the fields of engineering, medical and information technology. This trend also corresponds with measures for setting up research labs, encouraging patenting and licensing and university own startups. However, the overall research productivity profile of Sri Lankan institutions is still relatively small by global percent of GHP and this is mainly due to a lack of adequate funding or resources. However, there are weaknesses of universities for instance lack of adequate equipment, constraint funds, and inadequate qualified academic staff who are capable of handling large scale industry projects. These challenges evidence an emerging culture within Sri Lankan higher education of employing resources more efficiently and collaborating to fund infrastructure deficits (Mookiah, 2002).

4. Conclusion

In conclusion the trends discussed in the essay are consonant with other trends in the higher education context in Sri Lanka and with the global trends at the same time. From the experience of Europe, America and other parts of Asia, Sri Lanka has to improve its system of higher education

which will really meet the demands of the population and make the due contribution to the economic and social development.

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