

# **Convocation Address**

by

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# *Beyond the University*

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*Vice Chancellor, Faculty Members,  
Recipients of degrees and well-wishers,*

I would express my deep appreciation to the Senate of this University of Sri Jayewardenepura of which I am honoured to be the symbolic head, for their decision to confer on me the Honorary degree of Doctor of Letters. Considering the illustrious persons who have been honoured by the University at earlier convocations and today, I feel very humble indeed that my small contributions to the cause of education and for the development of women in Sri Lanka should thus be recognized.

I consider it also a very great privilege to have been invited to give this convocation address. I take the liberty to speak to this audience as the Chancellor of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura rather than as a special invitee.

May I, therefore, first take this opportunity to congratulate all of you who have successfully completed your courses of study and been awarded your degrees today. This is the culmination of over fifteen years of dedicated study on your part. I am aware that many of you, particularly during the period you were in the university, have had to face several hardships. Your achievement in spite of such difficulties is therefore all the more commendable. May I also congratulate the parents of these new graduates. But for the encouragement, guidance and opportunities given by them, sometimes at very great personal sacrifice, these young people may

not have been able to achieve this goal. Perhaps even greater motivation and drive is required from those who after a heavy day's work have followed classes for several years and successfully completed a post-graduate course of study. The support of your spouses who would have had to assume extra responsibilities and make many sacrifices to free you to follow these classes is no doubt an important factor contributing to your success. I congratulate all of you once again.

However hard the conditions under which you may have had to do your studies, I nevertheless wish to quote a passage from the Robbins Report on Higher Education in Great Britain, which I believe has relevance to the Sri Lankan student as well.

"In this age and country students are a privileged population; they have exceptional opportunities provided for them by the labour of the community. They are under the obligation to make the best of their three or four years and to remember as Milton did that 'ease and leisure is given thee for thy retired thoughts of other man's sweat'".

I would go further and say that this obligation should be carried beyond the portals of this university. It places a responsibility to give back to the community in some measure the benefits you have received. I trust that as you take your place in the adult world you will give with grace and without stint your time, your knowledge and your skills for the benefit of the community and accept with humility the fact that in spite of your degree there will be many gaps to be filled and many shortcomings to be remedied.

All of you, no doubt, have already started looking for avenues of employment in keeping with your academic achievement. This is a legitimate aspiration. Historically one of the services provided by universities, as social institutions catering to the intellectual and professional needs of the community, has been to turn out men



with the trained intellect required for the highest services of the state. This has been so both in the Buddhist and Western university traditions. It is said that study at Nalanda, which to all intents and purposes functioned as a university with its own seal, was considered a qualification for state service. After completing their education at this highly prestigious institution of higher learning, which drew scholars from all parts of the Buddhist world, it was not unusual for lay scholars to present themselves at court for service under the king. Similarly the tradition that Oxford and Cambridge provided men at the highest intellectual level for administration of Church and State goes back to the early beginnings of these two universities and is still embodied in the bidding prayer of Oxford University Sermons "that there never be wanting a succession of persons full qualified for the service of God in Church and State". Subsequently universities have also become the most high powered agency for producing the trained men required for the professions. Universities of Sri Lanka are in this same tradition and provide persons for the highest services in the land. Nevertheless with the democratization of education and the consequent expansion of the intake into universities, unemployment of graduates and their under-utilization in positions below the graduate level of employment have become serious problems even in the developed world. We face the problem here too, particularly in respect of graduates who have followed arts-based courses. For them it may be a long and frustrating wait unless the public sector has openings for them.

In the search for employment you may have to come to grips with the fact that in spite of a degree you have to equip yourself still further and develop more specialized skills for the level of work to which you aspire. It may be necessary to turn a spotlight on yourselves and assess not only your academic qualifications but also your personal attributes, your attitudes towards work and towards fellow beings in terms of the requirements of modern sector employment at graduate entry level. The need for this was brought

out very clearly in a study of unemployment among women arts graduates made by the Sri Lanka Federation of University Women (SLFUW) in 1981. Though the focus of the study was on women, several of the findings are of general relevance and applicable to both male and female. The study provided evidence which supported the widely prevalent view that the average arts graduate is at a marked disadvantage vis-a-vis the science graduate even in fields of employment where it would be expected that the arts courses of study would put them at a greater advantage. The greatest constraints to their employment were found to be the poor or inadequate knowledge of English and the perception of employers that they are wanting in attributes such as initiative and creative thinking which are important at the decision - making levels of employment.

The need for competence in English is frequently reiterated today from various platforms. Much is spoken of English as a "link language" between the various linguistic groups in the country. I believe that no foreign language is required to forge links between indigenous peoples. They had communicated with one another in their own tongues for centuries prior to the introduction of English, and do so still in many parts of the country. The knowledge of English is, however, of vital importance as a tool for acquiring new knowledge and for opening up vistas of the ever-widening world outside. In my view, our education became poorer for the fact that this function of English was blanketed by emotion and that during the last three decades even the very students who stood most to benefit by the study of English came to spurn it as the language of colonial rulers and a badge of social distinction. In the last few years a more realistic approach to the study of English seems to be emerging as is seen in the mushrooming of English tutorials throughout the country.

The sub-department of English of the University of Colombo carried out in 1976 a survey regarding the Use of English in the Public Sector. This was later extended to the semi-government and private sectors in the SLFUW study of Unemployment among Women Arts Graduates. The conclusions of these surveys were as follows:

“Conclusively it would appear that rural arts graduates, irrespective of sex, will remain outside the periphery of the private sector and permanently shut out of higher grades in the public sector, unless their English language skills are considerably upgraded”.

It will therefore be apparent to those of you who did not have the facilities in school to acquire competence in English or ignored its study in the university as of little value from the point of view of examinations, that upgrading all aspects of English language skills - speech, reading and writing - will be useful in the search for a job and essential for career development.

Another major constraint to obtaining graduate level employment was identified as the lack of personality qualities consonant with a high level of responsibility. Here I wish to bring to your attention only one aspect of the problem, namely the development of creative thinking. The term “creative thinking” does not refer, as is generally believed, purely to those mental processes which have resulted in profound scientific discoveries or technological innovations which have revolutionized the world. Nor does it refer exclusively to those talents which have produced works of art, literature or music surviving the passage of time. Creativity, it is now believed, is not confined to the Galileos, the Flemings, the Kalidasas or the Michael Angelos of the world. It is believed that every individual has in varying degrees the capacity to think afresh,



see new relationships and resolve problems in an innovative way. It is believed that basically the same thought processes are involved in a profound discovery as in the solution that a chimpanzee works out when he puts together two short sticks to get at the banana which could not be reached by using either of the sticks. But the extent to which this quality of mind is drawn out and developed depends to a very great extent on the social climate in which the individual functions and the encouragement given to develop it.

From their beginnings one of the functions of universities was the development of creativity in thinking. Conditions which favoured it had been built into their organizational structure. In the ancient universities this was achieved mainly through discussion and debate. Organized debate was part of the intellectual life of India over two thousand five hundred years ago. The "Schools of Discussion" in Nalanda drew scholars from all parts of the, Buddhist world to debate, in the words of the Chinese scholar I - tsung, "on all possible and impossible doctrines". Such mental exercises helped not only to expand scholarship but also to sharpen the wits and powers of thought. In the western university tradition too, from the time of Aristotle and the peripatetic scholars moving from place to place, discourse and debate were the accepted methods for learning and teaching, for the sparking of mind with mind. This tradition of lecture and discussion continues today and is also seen in the structure of the modern seminars. As important as discussion in the formal classroom situation is the thrust and parry of debate among students themselves both informally and in debating societies and student unions. These activities provide the environment conducive to developing those mental qualities and attitudes which have come to be considered the hallmark of a cultivated mind.

Today, however, in Sri Lanka with the high competition for jobs, education at every level, including the university, is focussed almost exclusively on examinations and examination results. Consequently education is directed more towards developing conformity rather than creativity. The effect of this on university students, who are the finest product of the educational system, is succinctly expressed by one university don, "In recent years we've had many firsts, but few outstanding students."

The development of creativity not only improves the employment potential of an individual, but also satisfies a far more basic need, namely, the joy of fulfilment. Archimedes' joyous cry of "Eureka" is fundamentally no different from the excited shout of a child when he discovers that the rotating arms of an electric fan have turned into one whirring mass of movement. It has been suggested that the opportunity to express the inborn creativity can make all the difference between mental health and personality disorders. Can this be one reason why in our universities strikes are endemic and behaviour problems such as sadistic ragging, regularly hit the head-lines? Are these the result of prolonged repression of creative needs?

The importance of developing creativity can be viewed from still another angle - from the point of view of national development. Though the demands of society which are reflected in our educational system promote conformity at the expense of originality and innovative thinking, yet these are the very qualities which are crucial for developmental purposes and to bring about rapid social and technological change.

And so a contradictory situation has arisen. In the struggle to manoeuvre through a very narrow bottle-neck into universities and the job market, the personality appears to shrink correspondingly



and lose the vitality required for levels of employment to which a graduate legitimately aspires. In this respect, the science student is at an advantage because of the nature of science education requiring observation, practical work, experiments and the personal guidance of a teacher. It is ironical that this should be so, since traditionally creativity was associated with the arts and the humanities and it was only grudgingly that science and technology were considered legitimate subjects for university study.

The recent development of valuing a subject primarily in terms of its marketability has had an adverse effect on the arts, humanities and even the social sciences, right down the educational ladder. In a seminar on Social Science Education organized by the Sri Lanka Association for the Advancement of Science in 1983 it was revealed that the low status given to these disciplines vis-a-vis the hard sciences is seen at every level from the universities downwards. This is reflected in the meagre allocation of time and money for these studies, the poor infra-structural support in the form of space, supplies and equipment, the inadequacy of facilities and opportunities to upgrade teaching skills and the low morale of the teaching staff.

This situation is the corollary to the present cry for "science, science and still more science" as the key to development. It has created an imbalance, which in my opinion, is detrimental to society as a whole. In leap-frogging to the technological age emphasis is almost exclusively on the hard sciences. Ignoring the other disciplines and the basic role that they too play in development cripples the forward leap and prevents society from drawing the fullest benefits of the fruits of development. It is accepted that the *raison d'être* for this all absorbing concern with development is to enable people to live in dignity in a stable civilized society, freed from the shackles and degradation of poverty. Both the

sciences and the arts have a role to play in this. The hard sciences provide the artefacts which enrich our lives. But the arts, the humanities and the social sciences are better equipped, because they are more directly involved with humanity, to develop that tolerance, that temper of mind, without which the products of science are turned to instruments of destruction. Hence this plea to rethink priorities, so that the importance attached to any particular course of study does not depend mainly or entirely on its marketability.

I wish at this point to draw attention to a new field of study which has arisen in the Social Sciences and is linked with Human Rights. I refer to Women's Studies.

The establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 as an agency of the United Nations Organization generated a greater sensitivity to the position of women as the largest section of humanity discriminated against. In 1967 the United Nations Declaration on the "Elimination of Discrimination against Women" stated :

"..... discrimination against women is incompatible with human dignity and with the welfare of the family and of society, prevents their participation on equal terms with men in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries and is an obstacle to the full development of the potentialities of their countries and of humanity."

The importance of women's issues was reaffirmed when the General Assembly declared 1975 International Women's Year and the years 1976 - 1985 the Women's Decade. In 1979 the United Nations Organization adopted the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. The articles of the Convention numbering thirty highlighted the areas of acute deprivation and called upon all member states to ratify the Convention. Sri Lanka is one of the signatories to this Convention.

The logical sequel to this interest in women's issues has been the impetus given to research on the subject in order to understand the reality of the situation in different parts of the world and to develop programmes which would meet the special needs of women in different geographical, cultural and socio-economic groups. And so Women's Studies cover a vast field and different levels of research ranging from the gathering of simple statistical data differentiated according to sex, to developing research tools and theoretical constructs, as well as forming an information network to disseminate and share the research findings. Women's Studies is now a university subject. Chairs for the subject exist in several universities. Most countries have also established Centres for Research into Women's Issues. Sri Lanka has not given the subject university status. Nevertheless here too interest has been created and research is being carried out through various international, governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Of the priority areas identified for study in Sri Lanka I wish to touch on two as of special concern to university women - one, the problems of combining the roles of a career woman and homemaker and two, the constraints to women reaching decision-making positions in public life.

It is usual to consider the dual role of bringing up a family and being engaged in productive activity as being mutually opposing. But I would like to place before you a more positive approach, namely the view that these two activities can be mutually supportive - that the family is materially and culturally enriched by a woman's involvement in a career and that the career of a woman develops and blossoms because of the support she receives from the family, particularly from the husband.



It would be incorrect to say that women of Sri Lanka do not suffer disabilities because of their sex. But perhaps because they have not been subject to the harsher forms of oppression that women in many parts of the world are subjected to, the Women's Movement in Sri Lanka does not have the aggressive features associated with the Women's Liberation Movement. Women in Sri Lanka have progressed not in spite of men but because of the helping hand they have received from them. For instance in the early twentieth century, the Suffragette Movement in Britain faced a great deal of opposition and hostility, before women were granted the right to vote. But in Ceylon in 1927 when the Donoughmore Commission was appointed for constitutional reforms the women in the Ceylon National Congress established the Women's Franchise Union with the assistance of the husbands, sons and other male relatives in the Congress and successfully made representations to obtain the franchise. Today in certain areas women have benefited more from state welfare programmes even than the men. More females participate in secondary school education and the life expectancy of females is higher than that of males.

Nevertheless combining the dual role of career woman and home-maker can indeed be taxing if the support of the husband is not available, if he is not prepared to shed conventional and stereotyped views regarding what constitutes women's work and what constitutes men's work within the household. Even more demanding will be the responsibilities on those university women who look forward to developing a career not merely to being employed. I have known many young women graduates who have had to abandon this hope because they got so bogged down by trivialities in the home. It is therefore important to determine priorities both in terms of family life and career.

In my view there is no substitute for the warmth, comfort and security of a happy, stable family life providing the supports and environment both material and psychological for the blossoming of a career. And so my parting wish for you all today is that you may be able to plan and guide your future, so that you enjoy both the strength and comfort of a happy home and the fulfilment of a chosen career.