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1996.11.02

# Solutions for the Graduate Unemployment Prof.Wimal G. Balagalle 

There were more than one reason for me to accept so willingly the invitation extended to me by the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura to deliver this convocation address on this solemn occasion. On the one hand, I consider this gesture as a token of appreciation of my humble contribution to this University as a university don and member of various university bodies for some thirty years; on the other, I thought this would provide me an opportunity to express a few ideas that might be useful not only to the new graduands but also to contemporary leaders of higher education in this country. Therefore, I wish to sincerely thank the Vice -Chancellor and the members of the Senate and of the University Council for offering me this opportunity.

I feel it is my next duty to congratulate the new graduands on achieving their desired goal and to give them my blessings. Dear friends, it is not solely due to your intelligence or your being fortunate enough to receive university education which is restricted to a very small fraction of the population that you have been able to fulfill your wish to enter this challenging society, the wish you had been cherishing not only during the three or four years at the university but even long before when you were studying at school. Your success is more due to your indomitable courage, your strength to endure untold hardship and surmount various obstacles with firm resolution.

These skills and good habits which you have cultivated may stand you in good stead in the near future, at least till you find a suitable employment. Your parents and guardians who prompted you to pursue higher studies and your teachers and Professors who guided you in university education no doubt rejoice on this occasion and are much happier than I am.

Under such a scheme every holder of a degree or a diploma passing out of universities or recognized higher professional training centres can first be pooled into the higher employment bureau and then be employed in relevant departments. corporations or institutes in accordance with requirements of the institute, their educational qualifications and preferences. During this short period they spend before they secure permanent employment, they may be made to follow an apprenticeship course providing a variety of options, which is properly planned to cater to different vocations including self-employment on the basis of an adequate subsistence allowance. It must, however, be particularly mentioned that this does not in any way mean a random absorption of those who are left over after selecting candidates by means of interviews etc. for administrative service, overseas service, education service and so on, is contemplated without taking into consideration the actual need of the exiting state departments and corporations. The employment of a work force receiving pay without work paying no regard to the requirements of the institute, would gradually lead the institute to its decline. Moreover, this situation would become a hindrance to its proper administration on the one hand, and through discouragement
and lack of enthusiasm on the part of those who work hard, it paves the way for the economic decline of the entire country, on the other.

Therefore, the best thing to do is to generate more and more job opportunities for educated workers, by improving methods of utilizing natural resources together with improved production methods in agricultural and industrial sectors in such a way that they contribute to national development, by regularizing import and export trade and by improving public amenities such as education, health and transport. This would provide an opportunity to the educated worker to make his contribution to the development process. It is the responsibility of the Ministry of Higher Education to obtain the cooperation of the Ministry of Planning \& Implementation, Ministry of Youth Affairs and other relevant ministries. With the help of the Ministry of Higher Education, the government can easily achieve the objective of turning out graduates and diploma holders capable of giving a thrust to development. For this purpose the University and other higher professional training institutes should be put to better use through proper co-ordination.

This is not to say that the institutes of higher education should provide only job-oriented courses. Apart from professional courses such as medicine, engineering and law, this can be successfully achieved by introducing certain professions like education and administration and prepare the students for them by means of an apprenticeship programme lasting two, three or six months after obtaining a first degree.

Long-term postgraduate and diploma courses like those of writership and mass communication conducted for first-degree holders employed in certain other professions do not come under this category.

Whatever the nature of the job-oriented course hinted at above, students should be enrolled only after correctly identifying the demand for each profession. Otherwise it might result in producing a set of graduates unfit to take up a job or possessing no useful subject knowledge. This is the main reason for the failure of the job-oriented courses tried during the university reorganization of 1973.

## Improving Job Fitness

We have so far discussed what the state and the institutes of higher education including universities could do to solve the unemployment problem of graduates. But we should not forget here that there are certain things that graduates themselves could do without idling away time waiting for jobs to come their way. As has been shown in the convocation address I referred to above, it is a responsibility on the part of the candidates to obtain additional qualifications and improve other skills which are considered, in addition to the degree, essential for a job in the private sector in particular. The above address has highlighted a number of obstacles which graduates, particularly the arts graduates, face in securing good jobs in the private sector. The first of these is the inadequate knowledge of English. Since this issue has already been discussed at length I do not propose to dwell on it on this occasion. The second is the failure on the part of the new graduates to display their ability or fitness to take up a job. This much
needed qualification covers the ability and the willingness to take up a responsibility, discipline and personality, creative thinking and so on. It appears that many employers have a preconceived notion that new graduates do not possess these qualities in sufficient measure. This situation has resulted, to some extent at least, from such incidents as student clashes, boycott of lectures, ragging and the closure of campuses for weeks months, reported in the mass media so often. This barrier can only be removed by the intelligent student community and the university administration by working in co-operation with the academic staff striving to remedy such unhealthy situation.

The main aim of the traditional education in ancient Sri Lanka as well as India was not just to impart knowledge but to promote individual discipline, and through it make him a worthy person.
'Vidya dadãti vinayan vinayad yãti pãtratam
pãtratvãd dhanamapnoti dhanãd dharmam tatah sukham'
(Knowledge gives discipline; through discipline one acquires worthiness; from worthiness one obtains wealth; wealth leads to virtue and from there to happiness).

The half verse 'bãhu sachchan cha sippan cha vinayo cha susikkhito' occurring in the Mahamangala Sutra too conveys a meaning similar to the above. In all stages in an individual's education such as elementary, junior secondary, senior secondary and tertiary or higher, subject knowledge and skill development running parallel to a training in traditional values or evaluation methods was expected of the traditional education in the East. This concept was upheld in Hindu and Buddhist universities of ancient India such as Taksasila and Nalanda Mahavihara as well as in the Tissarama mahavihara and Abhayagiri-Mahavihara of ancient Anuradhapura and the universities like Vijayabahu-pirivena of Totagamuva. We know that the rulers and thinkers of modern India expected similar results from education. This is exemplified by the following statement made by Sarvapalli Radhakrishnan in his foreword to the book New Frontiers of Education which was published in 1957. He says, "Education is not limited to the imparting of information or the training in skills. It has to give the educated a proper sense of values. Scientists and technologists are also citizens, and so have a social responsibility to the community in which they live".

That this is not a view confined to the East alone is borne out by the following idea expressed by Sir Walter Moberly in his book the Crisis in the University (1959): "If education can contribute to a moral, intellectual and spiritual revolution, then it offers a real hope of salvation to suffering humanity everywhere."

There have been ups and downs in the extent of spread and depth of Pirivena education including traditional education in ancient Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, literary and historical evidence affirm that character building and inculcating social ethics were considered right through one of its main objectives.

## New Courses, Modernization and Salutary Traditional Aspects

However, Education at all levels (including higher education) prevalent in the country today appear to have veered away from these goals, and remedial measures need to be taken without delay. Probably because the accelerated economic growth of the country has become the sole or rather the most important aim of the planners, the other ideals appear to slowly disappear from the society. The real development of a country should include not only the economic growth but also the development of the individual character of its citizens. Then only will the country be able to boast of a people cherishing social values, full of virtue, happy and content.

There is another matter that needs our consideration here. Although the freedom to select courses of study to one's liking is something much to be desired, our university education has today widened and developed so much so that many, if not all, who have the ability and the interest and have satisfied the basic requirements can immensely benefit by it. While this satisfies some of the present-day needs of the country, it has also given rise to problems of quality and management of education. Whatever field you are involved in the development process, you have to do so fully realizing that you have to proceed from simplicity to complexity. In his book of Societies and Men, Carl Harrison says, "Growth leads to complexity, complexity to specialization and specialization to integration".

In higher education, specialization aims at reaching and maintaining a high degree of excellence in a particular discipline or professional field. James A. Perkins sees this as a result of knowledge explosion. Writing an article to the volume titled The University in Transition (1966), he says, "The so-called knowledge explosion created a kind of strain on traditional institutions. Where the University had once thought of itself as an institution that could explore the unity of knowledge, it now finds that in order to maintain excellence it must concentrate on specialized segments of knowledge".

A criticism that has been levelled against this specialization is that, in certain universities today, it is being done as fashion without paying any heed to the needs of the day or its usefulness and that graduates do not get and opportunity to widen their general knowledge so important to them practically, as it directs their special attention to only one branch of knowledge. Many educationists believe that, even as specialization is continued, more and more opportunities should be provided for selecting subjects from among various departments and faculties. This fact should engage the attention of the relevant authorities on higher education.

If a higher degree of excellence is to be achieved in a certain aspect of a subject or professional discipline or educational research, there should be adequate material resources as well as expert personnel. But in respect of many disciplines in developing countries like ours, there is a general dearth of both these kinds of resources. In fields where there is no such dearth, there is often an excess of specialists. In such countries specialization needs to be planned in such a way that the maximum use could be made of such resources without letting them scatter due to senseless duplication or multiplication. This can also arrest waste of public funds. Most of these matters will be relevant to the establishment and maintenance of separate training institutes by various ministries and departments, to
conduct specialized courses that could be organized by the Ministry of higher Education and the institutes of higher education. If these training institutes are bent on turning out trainees in excess, without confining themselves to training workers for internal requirements, it might create problems specially for outside employers in selecting suitable persons for appointment, and for the workers in getting approved salary scales and obtaining promotions etc.

An upward trend is generally seen in present day universities in their readiness to modernize courses and to add new features. If this is done taking into consideration the progress in various subject fields as a result of knowledge explosion, the practical importance depending on the country's needs and the availability of resources, it would be very beneficial to the progress of the institute and its good name. If, on the contrary, it is reduced to mere imitation of foreign examples as a fashion, it would only result in putting a certain section in trouble. An important thing to remember in organizing courses is that the local traditional knowledge should not be allowed to be forgotten but should rather be preserved and made use of, without confining ourselves to knowledge explosion taking place in the world outside and to the progress of the subject fields.

When we talk of tradition we should not forget that our universities too inherit a tradition. Even this convocation being held today can be traced back to an European university tradition that started about ten centuries ago. Our modern university is largely based on that tradition. However, a still older system of university education existed in the East and also in Sri Lanka. This system disappeared from Sri Lanka around the $16^{\text {th }}$ century apparently as a result of foreign invasions.

A healthy tradition that existed in Sri Lanka universities in the recent past was the writing and discussing tutorials. It is sad to note that this practice is slowly disappearing today from our universities. The writing of tutorials is of special importance for studies in the fields of humanities and social science where there is less involvement of practical work such as surveys, investigations, experiments and training taking place in the laboratories or in the world outside beyond the class-rooms:

The main benefit of this type of activity is that the students are encouraged to read widely, since this would compel them to read in English even with some difficulty, a language skill in addition to the subject knowledge could be acquired. The training he or she receives in collecting data relevant to the subject in hand, arranging and presenting them to prove a point and in the skillful use of the language would be of immense benefit to him/her in the long run. This might provide an answer to the accusation made by some that the graduates who pass out of universities in recent times do not display a general knowledge as much as those of the previous generation.

Discussion and dialogue was an important aspect of university education both in the East and the West, from the very ancient times. By this method the student was able to develop his skill of thinking creatively and to establish his viewpoint by refuting opposing views by logical presentation of his facts. It was this dialectical method that was used by such philosophical teachers of great wisdom as Confucius of ancient China, Socrates of Greece and the Buddha of India in teaching their doctrines. The dialectical method held an important place in the teaching in the institutes of higher education such as Academy
started by Plato and Lycium by Aristotle in Athens in the 4th century B.C. Paving way for discussion among students in our universities too as was done in the past by making use of tutorial classes, creative literature classes and classes of literary criticism and so on, would be a main factor in their character development.

Lastly, I would like to mention another matter of vital importance in shaping higher education in this country. A substantial interest can be seen in universities todays in the development of knowledge in the students by offering new courses and revising existing ones. There is also sufficient interest seen in the physical development of students, through sports and physical training. It is worthwhile inquiring whether sufficient interest is shown in the mental development of the student. Its importance in every stage of education is also implied in the above quoted statements of Radhakrishnan and Moberly. A basic necessity herein is to investigate into mental problems of students and take remedial measures. Such methods as would involve them in extra-curricular activities catering to a variety of interests such as creative, artistic, religious and cultural activities, and voluntary programmes of educational and social work would be of immense benefit here. It is my belief that, if this is done, our university will be able to produce perfect scholars fit to take up any responsibility as exemplified by the dictum 'Knowledge gives discipline' quoted above.

Wishing once again all the graduands a bright future I conclude my convocation address.
Thank you all for listening to me.

