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2003.07.16

# New Trends in University Education: The Need for Re-evaluation and Reform <br> <br> Dr. Karunasena Koditueakkau 

 <br> <br> Dr. Karunasena Koditueakkau}

Iconsider it a privilege and an honour to deliver this keynote address at this convocation ceremony held to award degrees to the graduates of the external degree programme of the University where I served first as a lecturer, then as competent authority, and finally as the Vice Chancellor.

Vidyodaya Pirivena which was founded in Maligakanda, Colombo, under the leadership of Venerable Hikkaduve Sri Sumangala Nayaka Thero in 1873 was granted the University status since 1959. The first Vice Chancellor of this University was Venerable Welivitiye Sri Soratha Nayaka Thera. He was able to develop this University into a center of higher learning with his indefatigable strength and courage overshadowing even other contemporary universities. The Venerable Thero was the pioneer of introducing the field of management in to Sri Lankan universities. Later he was able to establish this University in 25 acres of land which was originally donated to Sri Sunethra Devi Pirivena of Pepiliyana by the King Parakramabahu VI in order to transfer merit to his mother, queen Sunethara Devi. The University of Sri Jayewardenepura, which is located on this land, thus epitomises this meritorious act of the royal family. The university established a separate unit since 1979 for the external degree examinations. This is its first batch of students to receive degrees at a convocation ceremony. The $40^{\text {th }}$ anniversary of the demise of the late Venerable Sorata will be commemorated at a ceremony tomorrow, the $17^{\text {th }}$ of July. Due to these two reasons, I consider today to be a historic day.

I am extremely happy to hear that the University of Sri Jayewardenepura has organized this ceremony to award degrees for these young men and women who have achieved their academic goals with determination largely through self- study, with some guidance and assistance of the resources of the University. I myself, as a beneficiary of the free education system, salute the University of Sri Jayewardenepura, the Vice Chancellor, the members of the Senate and the Faculty Members for their effort to preserve and develop the concept of free education in this country. It is the fervent hope of the present government to foster and develop meaningfully the free education system in Sri Lanka. Although a comprehensive modernization is now taking place in the general and vocational education system due to the large amount of foreign aid coming in, this is not intended at all to curtail the existing free education of the country. The participation of non- governmental organizations and professionals is expected to be of complementary assistance to implement the educational policy and planning of the government.

We intend to establish realistic and practical educational programmes in order to alleviate the many problems such as poverty and unemployment that we face today in this country. These programmes should be carried out under broad educational reforms in accordance with the aims and objectives related to the economic development of the country and the needs of the modern world. The attention
of the Sri Lankan universities must be geared to introduce and conduct new academic programmes. These new programmes, in addition to the existing academic courses, must help the society to develop its new thinking process and to build up proficiency and skills needed to survive within this competitive economic framework of today.

It is high time for us to consider modernizing and reforming not only the existing internal degree programmes but also the external degree programmes of the universities. The Universities should develop and distribute management skills and technical knowledge among the young men and women through out the island. I would like to elaborate on this point as well as on the reforms and their relevance to the field of education.

With the termination of the British administration in 1948, we began to govern this country as an independent nation. However it is a well known fact that the political, economic and social development of the country since then have been unsatisfactory to say the least. During this time we engaged in two battles which lasted up to the end of the year 2001, beginning with a political and ideological battle which ultimately led to massive human destruction. The governments of our neighbouring countries as well as others in the region, which used to trail behind us in development by a number of years, have now superceded us by several decades. Severe economic regression, the disintegration of our society, the loss of thousands of human lives and other misfortunes are the disastrous results that we gained by this.

The changes that the globalization process has brought and is still bringing have created a borderless competitive world where knowledge and skills are given pride of place. A situation has been created where no country can achieve successful development without obeying the dictates of a laissez-faire economy. No chance is given for a country, specially a third world country, to develop in isolation in this globalized world. The lack of a medium of communication and distance that had posed obstacles to the relationship among countries are now rendered meaningless by the emergence of some languages as universal languages and the development in the field of information technology. Thereby, knowledge of a universal language and skill in information technology are prerequisites for meeting the challenges of this borderless competitive world. They have become the basic tools for gathering skills and competitiveness of a particular society. They have become a determiner of economic progress. Countries like Finland, The United States of America, Singapore, Sweden, Iceland, Canada, Denmark, Taiwan and Germany which had paid attention to developing their skills in information technology record the highest per capita income. This has proved the link between information technology and economic development.

Given this background, the most farsighted step we can take today for the future prosperity of Sri Lanka is comprehensive human development. This can be done only by completely overhauling and modernizing the field of education. This modernizing process should take place not only at a university level but also at the level of "general education" which includes the school system and the vocational training institutes. The present government has recognized this need as a priority in development. Already steps have been taken to plan implemented action. I would like to speak briefly about some of
these. The Ministry of Education has already launched a massive project to develop the skills of school children in information technology and to introduce English as a universal language. We have been given aid by both the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank for this purpose. 800 school computer centers will be established before the end of this year under the secondary education development project funded by the Asian Development Bank. Already 212 centers in 22 districts have been successfully established. In addition, steps will be taken to create 200 more centers before the end of 2004. English will be introduced as a universal language in two ways. That is, by providing opportunities for the learning of English as well as creating the possibility of studying in the English medium. The teaching of English will be broadened at primary and secondary levels at schools as well as in the national institutes of education by this project funded by the World Bank. The present government hopes to make a series of changes in the entire university system as well. The first successful step has been taken towards it already.

There are some more essential elements needed for this modernization process. That is the interest and the contribution of the university community, the generous commitment and contribution of school teachers, the understanding and commitment of university and school students, the guidance and encouragement of parents. It is an important task of the academic staff of the universities as well as the school teachers to guide students towards commitment to their education instead of belief in meaningless political ideologies and this should be done with the involvement of parents as well. These elements should join together in order to endow the country with a group of sons and daughters who evaluate social values within the cultural tradition of Sri Lanka. It is our duty and responsibility to protect the intelligent and educated young men and women who pursue their higher studies in universities, technical colleges and other institutes of higher learning. We must prevent them from getting involved in destructive forces that obstruct their academic goals. Sri Lanka is a poor country. It has suffered greatly due to debt, economic recession and an ethnic war which lasted for more than two decades. Our future destiny under these circumstances will be an unhappy one if we do not invest properly the money that we receive in education. Therefore it is very important to direct our young men and women to achieve beneficial results from the money that we spend for education. Our duty is to advise and direct them in the correct path. It is a social responsibility. We can create the mutual understanding and ethnic harmony through the proper communication. In addition, the nongovernmental sector and professionals should also contribute towards this process. They should actively contribute towards the changes taking place in the field of education. In this way they will complement the programmes initiated by the government. This will help in providing development opportunities to all sectors of society.

We hope that this two fold effort that of providing opportunities for developing skills in information technology and of learning the universal language will enable the present and future generations to capture a past that they had lost and to enter the fast moving world of information technology with a giant leap to have a share of all benefits.

Graduates as well as undergraduates will be able to face the challenges of the future if only they are equipped with knowledge of information and universal language in addition to the subjects they have
studied. Though many universities have already given the necessary resources for this purpose, only a very few students make use of them. This has to change. University lecturers should make suggestions as to how things could be improved and make a speedy contribution towards this change. All of you who are receiving degrees today have achieved an important victory in your life. I trust you that you would have given thought to the acquiring of the skills that I have talked about, along with this education you have received as external students perhaps while you were involved in a profession. This will make the victory you have achieved by being honoured with a degree, so much the greater.

As the Minister of Human Resources, Education and Cultural Affairs, I wish to convey my heartfelt thanks to the Vice Chancellor, the academic staff, Registrar and the administrative staff for organizing this excellent convocation ceremony to award external degrees for these young men and women who have missed the opportunity by one or two marks to enter the university as internal students. I would like to conclude my speech by wishing all of you a very bright future and also by expressing my gratitude to the university for inviting me to deliver this convocation address.

