

FROM THE DESK OF ...

Education and knowledge economy – For reconciliation and national development in Sri Lanka

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Human resource development is an important basis of higher education. Higher education institutes, such as universities, are involved in knowledge generation and creation, curation and transfer of knowledge to students, as well as to the community. The knowledge gained through education gives strength to a person, as well as to society, enabling them to face the globalised challenges of the modern world with confidence. Well-formulated higher education policies and procedures promote deep analytical thinking, positive attitudes, skills, and competencies for gathering information in the interest of problem solving, finally producing a person who can make a positive contribution to society. The education one receives is for the benefit of not only the individual but also society, nations and the world at large. Education is one of the basic human rights that need to be provided by all nations. Since independence, Sri Lanka has provided free education up to tertiary level, which has resulted in a literacy rate of 95%. Leveraging on this, the present Government has identified “knowledge hub” as one of the five hubs to be developed in its strategy to become the Wonder of Asia.

Education is a significant foundation for skills and competency development, and tertiary education further empowers a person with knowledge and multidisciplinary skills. Values such as respect for individual opinion, trust, and team spirit are inculcated through education. A country needs to produce educated intellectuals for its national development. In this context, the University of Colombo is in the process of developing a virtual campus to offer online courses through a multimodal delivery system. This will open up more opportunities for Sri Lanka in particular, and the international community as a whole, and will help address the present limitations of tertiary education in the country. The University of Colombo is already connected to the global classrooms of the Cisco-Networking Academy and the Microsoft ICT Advanced Academy. Collaboration is being forged with the global Project Management Institute for similar international professional certification systems. This type of global university-industry collaborations is extremely important for the professional advancement of human resources.

KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND HIGHER EDUCATION

The economy of a country becomes a “knowledge economy” when the sustained use of new knowledge becomes a central part of its national development process. Information communication technology (ICT) systems are essential for the acquisition and dissemination of new knowledge.

New knowledge and innovations, through competition, have played a crucial role in development since the beginning of human history. With globalisation and technological revolution of the last few decades, however, knowledge has clearly become the key driver of economic development. The central role of knowledge for innovation in economic growth is widely acknowledged. Countries with knowledge-based economies benefited quickly from the new opportunities offered, with a high growth rate and increased productivity. In Europe, small and dynamic economies have become models of knowledge-based growth. Due mainly to their human resource advancement with knowledge in competitive higher educational systems human resource giants such as China and India are benefiting immensely from the knowledge economy. With the dawn of peace in Sri Lanka, human capital advancement with new compatible knowledge has become a priority here too.

“Intellectual poverty” is one of the main causes of conflict; economic empowerment through education can be a solution for such conflict. Tertiary education has a significant role to play in providing knowledge and skills, thereby empowering the rural sector and aiding in reconciliation and national development. It is very important for developing countries such as Sri Lanka to realise that in order to join the fast-moving knowledge-based global economy they must also move rapidly, while yet protecting their own cultures that play a significant role in fostering intelligence and health. Successful transition to a knowledge economy depends on the key contribution of universities, where a knowledge-based skilled work force is continuously being produced to build the nation. Since universities are involved in generating the latest information essential to acquire modern knowledge, continuous production of such a work force would sustain the knowledge economy.

Let us consider a novel example of how knowledge pursued through education has significantly improved the socio-economy of the rural community in Sri Lanka. Tissue culture technology for bananas developed in laboratories at the University of Colombo was enthusiastically taken up by rural farmers, both young and old, as such plants with proper agronomic practices would yield an eight to tenfold increase in income. The demand for tissue-cultured banana plants rapidly increased and rural farmers showed enthusiasm in taking up the novel technology, since the end result would be increased income for them. Having observed this, the university, through its newly established Institute for Agro-Technology and Rural Sciences (in the south of Sri Lanka, ²⁵⁰ km away from Colombo), introduced online Agro-Technology certificate courses aimed at the rural farming community. Many farmers had not even laid hands on a computer before. They were provided with an initial orientation in the use of ICT tools. They all took the online programmes with keenness and got through all the certificate courses leading to a diploma. Access to courses and learning could be at their own location and at their convenience; the knowledge gained could be immediately applied in the setting of their farms. This example clearly demonstrates the potential benefits of education for Sri Lanka. People want to pursue tertiary education, gain knowledge, and apply it for the sake of economic development. Sri Lanka has a very high potential for the knowledge economy.

After three decades of suffering, the people of Sri Lanka can now live in peace and in the hope of national development. Reconciliation, the development of trust, and economic empowerment will play key roles that could be addressed through education and a knowledge-based economy. Sri Lanka has rich intellectual capacity and high literacy levels which, combined with our natural resources, could help develop our country and strengthen our position in Asia. The blending of new knowledge gained through higher education with the rich cultures, ancient technologies and natural flora and fauna of our country could well make it a new “knowledge hub” in Asia.