



## ENHANCING UNIVERSITY EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA BOTH QUANTITATIVELY AND QUALITATIVELY

### Authors

*Deepthi Bandara, Oliver Illeperuma, Ranjan de Silva, Remy Jayasekera, Lakshman Dissanayake, Kapila Goonasekera, Kithsiri Abhayasingha, Gratian A Peiris, Jayantha Jayawardena, Saman Amarakone, I M Dharmadasa, Chula Goonasekera* **On behalf of LEADS forum**

### Abstract

- Sri Lanka's higher education is in a dire state.
- Ragging (hazing) in universities should be eradicated entirely to permit free thinking and expression, which is the basic need (element) for an Institution to be a university. Staff-student mentorship practised worldwide should be in place in all universities.
- Criminal activities committed by university students should be subject to the country's law and order and discipline, and covering up from within itself should be considered a punishable offence committed by relevant officials.
- The number of students admitted to universities should increase substantially to encompass at least 60% of AL students.
- Public vs Private funding is an irrelevant debate and anti-education rhetoric. If we educate our children, we will have a better future as a nation. Students in public universities should pay back their course fees once they are employed, minimising the impact of 'brain drain' whilst also increasing the funding for new student admissions.
- The 1978 University Grants Commission (UGC) model is too passive and outdated for the 21st century. Universities should be granted more autonomy to be competitive, and the UGC should promote more quality assurance and publish key performance indicators of each program (course) and the robust student selection process for the university. Furthermore, the z-score system is currently a 'sham' and should be scrapped.
- All public universities should be allowed to admit international students as a form of income generation and promoter of healthy competition between universities whilst facilitating more income for universities to expand.
- A mechanism should be in place to promote innovation, research, and entrepreneur collaboration, including patenting, without burdening innovators and researchers. Furthermore, post-doc positions should be created to encourage more research training.
- Universities that are not competitive and not improving should be advised and conditionally supported by the Government to change course and achieve satisfactory performance indicators.
- Universities producing unemployable graduates should take responsibility for innovating additional bridging courses to make them more recruitment friendly. If they cannot do this to bridge the gaps in their own courses, this role should be handed over to another university that can do it at the offender's expense.
- More international students should be allowed to be admitted to any university with strict adherence to minimum national entry requirements with approved added qualifying features of each university.

- Universities should revise the current staffing model to promote the recruitment and retention of quality staff who maintain continued contributions in teaching, service and research to the university objectives.
- All courses should be conducted in English except the language-specific degree programs.
- Our state universities should be made independent and depoliticise their managing structure.

### Why we need more university undergraduates.

Ideas, knowledge and competencies are the currency of our time, meaning that individuals need access to education to succeed. In contrast, countries need a well-educated population if they are to progress. Thus, promoting timely education through ample competitive opportunities should be our goal if we are to see any progress.

Education supports humanity, democracy, political stability, sustainability, and the economic development of a country. Thus, we must actively promote higher/tertiary (university) education to the highest standard for the highest number of graduates. The bankrupt status of the country is not an obstacle to this. In return, we will see a significant shift in how we work, the means of living and even the election of sensible governments that care for the public. In developed countries, 40-50% of the workforce are well-trained graduates to do the jobs they do. In Sri Lanka, our target should be to accommodate all advanced-level qualifying students (about 60%) for higher education.

Australia and Sri Lanka have similar populations (25M vs 22M). In 2022, Australian universities enrolled 1.4 million local and international students (5.6% of the population), while Sri Lanka enrolled just 0.045M in its 17 state universities 2022 (0.002% of the population).

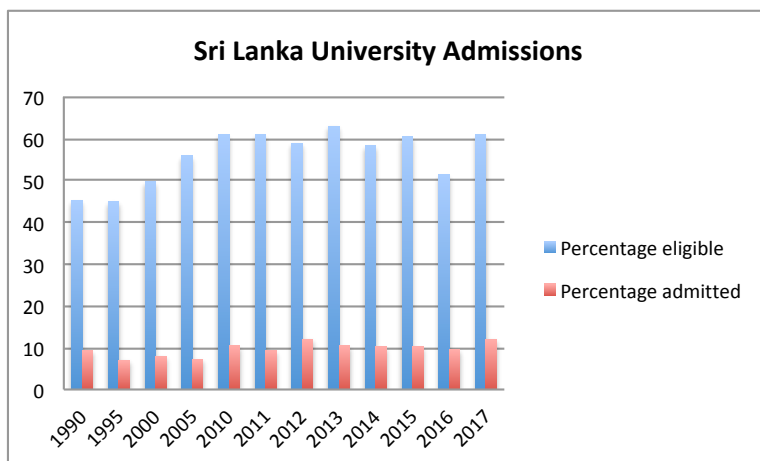


Figure 1 Admissions to the state universities (UGC data)

Sadly, University admissions have stagnated for decades in Sri Lanka (Figure 1). Despite the national commitment to 'free' education, only 5% of the advanced level students have been admitted to the university during the last two decades. The government's interest in promoting university education is known to be lukewarm, with only 1% of the GDP allocated for national education at one time. Even today, the financial support is dire for maintaining quality university education for 'free'. In contrast, developed countries commit 6-8% of their GDP to education.

Hon.  
C. W. W. Kannangara  
ආ. ධර්මසේන. ධර්මසේන

Dr. C. W. W. Kannangara  
Minister of Housing and Local Government  
In office  
1952-1956

Minister of Education  
In office  
1931-1947

Kannangara was the Chairman of the Committee that submitted the Free Education Bill for a vote in the State Council 'Father of Free Education in Sri Lanka'

**It is free education, that was proposed but not curtailing freedom for education**

1. Education should be free from the Kindergarten to the University.
2. The mother tongue should be used as the medium of instruction in the Primary Schools.
3. English should be taught in all schools from standard III.
4. A curriculum for the child to develop its "head, heart and hands"
5. Education of the emotions, education of the intellect and practical ability for well-being

**Moral, forward thinking  
Patriotic project**

Figure 2 The official goals of the free education bill promoted by CWW Kanangra in 1940's

CWW Kannangara’s proposal for free education in the country at the time had five major goals to be reached (Figure 2). It is 75 years since independence, but we as a country have not even fulfilled the first three. This only reflects the attitude of our successive governments.

It is almost criminal that 90% of the advanced level students are left in limbo by not providing any opportunity or funding for higher education elsewhere and also not allowing the development of graduate education programs in demand locally. This almost looks like a subtle effort by our current politicians with little educational merit to keep our higher education at bay for their gain by making the voters believe ‘politicians are the gods’ who provide all jobs, perks and facilities to citizens. Like many other developing countries, Sri Lanka determines a person’s future at the university entry level. Thus, universities should take leadership in promoting vocational training programs, too, for technicians or semi-professionals to gain professional qualifications. In many developed countries, one can commence a degree at any stage of one’s life. We need articulated arrangements between universities and institutions offering such qualifications.

In putting tertiary education on the right track, the first step should be to depoliticize universities, making them genuinely independent; let the universities select the right Vice Chancellors with the will to do it and the councils to empower them. The politicians should not dictate the appointment of the Vice Chancellors or the university council members.

*Recommendations*

1. The private vs public funding debate promoted by our shrewd politicians for their advantage has been a curse for our country. We must safeguard all forms of education irrespective of how it's funded.
2. There is nothing called 'free' education. Someone must pay for it privately, individuals or the public, via the government. It is time we consider higher education a national priority and student funding is converted to something repayable by the benefactors after qualification and employment, maintaining its 'free' status at the point of delivery. This will help Sri Lanka afford more students for higher education and prevent the losses that the country and its poor tax-paying people have to bear when the qualified graduates migrate overseas due to the current flow of 'brain drain'.
3. Convert 'free' education without accountability to a form of 'free education' with responsibility for the receivers and providers. It is prudent to estimate the costs of university education and split it between the government and the individual. Similar to other countries

government can grant universities 40% of the funding, whilst the rest should be recovered from students once they have qualified and employed. Such a repayable loan model will provide a 'free' education status to the student as a student. This is the fairest possible way we can afford 'free' education with accountability on both fronts, the public and the student. This additional funding can be used to support more students' education with better facilities.

4. The above recovery of expenses strategy is justified and fair for all as the University education is expensive (staff, buildings, laboratories, libraries etc.) and needs maintenance at its highest technological advancements to maintain the quality of its programs. New e-readers mean learners do not need to access a physical library because they can browse online for what they need and then download the text at virtually no cost. Once laboriously created and updated by staff, course materials can be digitised and rapidly edited. Access can be gained to the best material and best team in the world by using technology.

### Why we need to address the quality of university education.

Some of our universities produce 'graduates', but they cannot find employment locally or elsewhere, pointing to the fact that these graduates are 'unemployable' (Figure 3). These failed products of university education will inevitably become a national burden, and they will be a vulnerable group used by shrewd politicians to create 'havoc' for their advantage. The relevant universities' lack of accountability is a significant quality assurance issue that must be fixed.

Furthermore, failing students should not be considered as if it is purely their fault. This is the most unlikely reason. The main reason is the teaching staff not completing the learning curve before the examination. In other words, the team should be very familiar with the curriculum, and the tests should be prepared based on the 'blueprint' that fully accommodates the curriculum. Asking for small print or yesterday's research publication is an inferior examination format. Thus, the accountability for failing students should return to the staff of that particular faculty.

We must implement Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as mandatory and transparent for all national universities. These KPIs should include all formal aspects of higher education on quality assurance. These KPIs ratings should be published in the university handbook to allow students applying to understand the quality of education they would acquire. If there are not enough applicants, those university programs should be terminated without wasting public money on useless projects which add to our enormous list of 'white elephants'.

Sri Lankan universities need to use benchmarking for all subjects to enhance their quality and performance, enabling comparison with the best universities in the world and using KPIs to measure improved performance within the universities.

Expanding universities, using the current model that demands an extensive physical infrastructure, is not required, as spaces, where people come together to learn could be made more flexible, multipurpose, and virtual. They need not be located on large, costly campuses. Instead, they could be scattered around the community, using workplaces, schools, community facilities, homes and public buildings, including the current state university infrastructure.

## Unemployable graduates



*Figure 3 Sadly unemployable graduates have become vulnerable to political exploitation.*

Ratification of new modern degree programs is needed to ensure its graduates will be in demand when they qualify for recruitment. The university ratification process for its education programs is too long and purely hierarchical (Figure 4). For example, suppose we want to launch a B Sc Program in Artificial Intelligence (AI). AI is now considered more potent than a nuclear bomb, and in the future, AI competence will exert a similar or higher threat to humanity. It has already established an uncontrolled ability to clone voices, impersonate individuals and documents and even write theses in a few seconds on the topic. In the current UGC paradigm, even if proposed tonight, it will be at least another ten years before the first graduates proficient in AI see the world's light with this new qualification, only to realise that their degree is already out of date and the world has moved on. The state universities' non-competitive nature makes them not proactively engage in cutting-edge education needs unless directed by the UGC itself. This has to be addressed immediately using digital launching formats and program quality assurance.

An essential way of producing job-ready graduates, improving the currency of staff knowledge, and enhancing their income is collaboration with industry, which should be pursued vigorously. Learners want to know if their education will equip them to get a job or contribute to their community in some other tangible way. Employers are asking prospective employees what they know and what they can do. While traditionally, universities were expected to impart knowledge, at present, they are increasingly judged by their graduates' competencies. In designing university courses, this has to be considered without leaving the competency part altogether to professional institutions or employers. Further, University undergraduates should be taught employability skills such as communication, behaviour at the workplace, time management and self-improvement in a structured way. This is lacking in today's graduates.

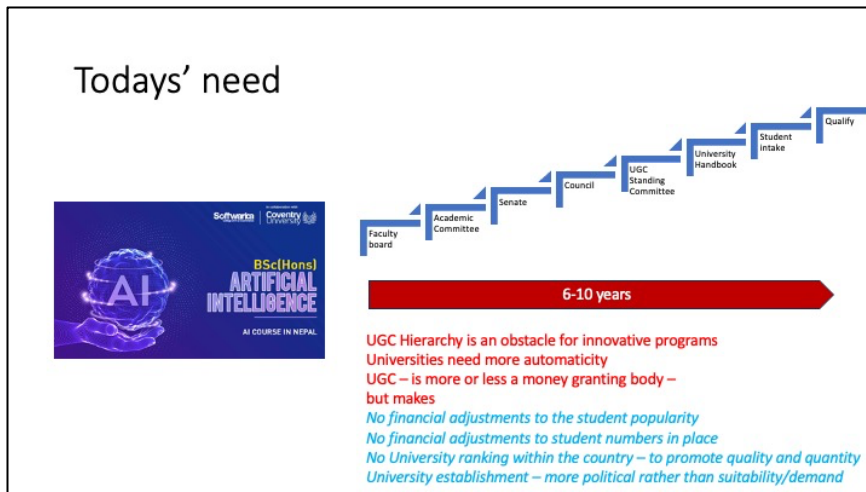


Figure 4 Laborious approval pathway for new degree programs

Our University Grants Commission (UGC) is an obstacle to innovative programs in the current setting. Universities should be allowed autonomy. This will evolve into a competition between the universities to attract the best graduates for the best programs. Such a competition is healthy and is of national benefit. Neither the popularity among students nor the quality currently dictates the annual grants the UGC will allocate to a particular university. In other words, this grant provision paradigm has become the most powerful propagator of 'passive' universities in Sri Lanka that do not progress for innovations and upgrades as needed.

Our universities are, therefore, not proactive but very passive. Furthermore, politicians are keen on establishing new universities, but not for the right reasons. We currently have 17 without reference to the demand, facilities or teachers. Politicians are only after their commissions based on the contracts offered to build them. There are reports of no laboratory material and consumables, and practicals slashed as a consequence, and libraries with no new books purchased for the last 3-4 years. Internet may be one reason, but libraries cannot shut down.

Unfortunately, establishing new universities without proper feasibility has become a major 'corruption' route covertly followed by politicians and their stooges with the excuse of offering a public service. The feasibility of new university proposals is not correctly assessed. UGC chairpersons are politically appointed. Vice Chancellors, too, are designated with a political ground influence. Thus, how can we expect any better from them, as they are there to satisfy their political masters?

All university courses should be taught in English. Our students go to Russia or China and learn their language in 6 months and become competent enough to complete their degrees using that language. Why can we not do that? Students taught in Sinhala or Tamil have no access to most of the developments taking place in the world and live the life of a "frog in the well". This is a political, racial and social minefield, but the future is bleak if we do not do this.

### Recommendations

- Universities should be given the autonomy to decide on the number of students they take, modify education programs and innovate new ones.
- The UGC standing committee approval requirement for implementing any new undergraduate education program should be scrapped. The UGC instead should focus on the quality of the said graduate programs, their popularity, and critical performance indicators

and publish these assessments in the university admission handbook for the new entrants to make their choice. University funding should be based on the number of students admitted and not on artificial sums allocated based on numbers proposed with unjustified favouritism.

- There is no university ranking within the country based on full quality assurance principles. There are standard key performance indicators (KPIs) for universities, and there is no need to reinvent the wheel. They should commence ranking the universities and publishing their ranks annually.
- University funding allocation should not be based on an arbitrary number of students but on the actual numbers admitted. The latter will be linked to the program's quality and popularity amongst students. The lack of students will lead to a spontaneous demise of such programs, departmental and campuses saving a lot of public money for better use elsewhere.

## Quality assurance

At present, state university funding is not based on student numbers or the popularity of a university but on the number of students allocated but not the number admitted. Some university programs are fully funded, but the annual intake is virtually empty. Despite this, the Universities are given the total funding for the anticipated number of students. What is needed is to promote purposeful universities and educational programs and not waste public money keeping worthless universities alive. Unpopular departments and universities should be closed if they cannot improve their key performance indicators.

The UGC should take leadership in developing Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), and the QA council should take full responsibility for implementing them. There should be consequences for universities not complying with this need. Most importantly, the QA Council should be independent and not under the UGC's purview, which undermines this process's value. Sadly, the efforts undertaken by the Ministry of Education in establishing an independent commission for quality assurance and accreditation of all higher education Institutes and Programs have not progressed and may be purposefully delayed by the UGC for political reasons. The lack of interest in gathering pace on quality assurance is to cover their weaknesses and loopholes and keep the 'status quo' as it is, even though the graduates may not be employable. QA is a process to improve the education standards and the well-being of students and staff. Lack of attention to this is a national crime, as what is at stake is public money and the talents of young students in our nation.

Quality assurance (QA) must also include feedback from students and staff. This is paramount in any QA assessment, as customer satisfaction is the primary indicator of success. Obtaining input from recently qualified alumni, too, is essential.

Graduate employment at qualification is essential. To achieve this, academic curricula should be continuously upgraded to match the changing demand in the world. It is vital to target international standards simply because; otherwise, we will never be able to become a developed nation as the graduates taking over the country's workforce will not be innovative and competent to impose developments to match that in the world.

The world is moving fast, and what we know today can be obsolete in a few years. There needs to be a structured way of maintaining a currency of knowledge for the staff through programs such as returning to the industry, consulting, collaboration or part-time work. Independent competition between universities is one method to keep this need alive every second.

## Foreign students

Universities must be allowed to admit a maximum of maybe 30% of international students. This number is comparable with what the leading universities are doing worldwide, irrespective of the country or governance, formats and attitudes (Figure 5). Education is a wealthy mode of income for any country, and we have the talent. But the rules of the UGC and the government prevent this from happening. That is why we need more autonomy for the universities. The 1978 UGC paradigm for higher education is outdated and needs to change.

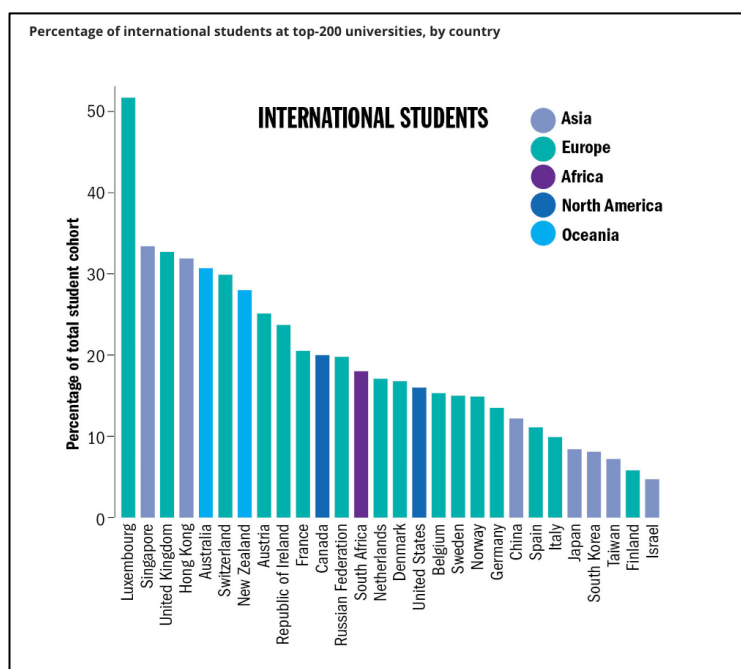


Figure 5 The percentage of international students in world's top universities by country

Sadly, in Sri Lanka, National Universities do not allow free entry to international students. A tiny fraction of international students may attend based on political memoranda or children of Sri Lankan expatriates. They cannot be considered proper competitive 'foreign students' entry. A free competitive application and a selection process are required to assess the popularity of a particular university or an education program worldwide. International students bring much-needed cash to the university, which promotes more local student admission with added funding (Figure 6). The best universities in the world allow about 30% of international students, and their qualifications, in return, provide a worldwide advertisement for the universities. Staff recruitment to serve the need and retention of good staff is essential to promote international reputation and attract better students.

It is suitable for our red-brothers who oppose foreign student enrolment to know that even Chinese universities seek international collaborations like most nations. This is fundamental because it enhances both ranking and educational standards.



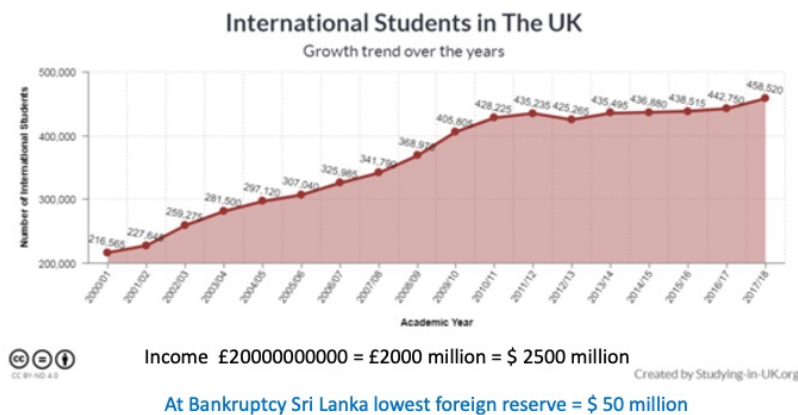


Figure 6 Continued expansion of international students in the UK universities and incomes

Furthermore, advanced universities promote learning between universities via student exchange programs or electives. Sadly, foreign opportunities available are not adequately advertised for Sri Lankan students. This displays our 'passive' attitude amongst national university administrators. Some Commonwealth students may be willing to get admitted to our universities with 80% of their course fees funded by the Commonwealth. But these opportunities are limited to paperwork, as the applicant enrolment shows little progress.

### Staff recruitment and retention

Quality staff recruitment, development and retention need to be focused on ensuring the universities can prosper. At present, university lecturers who join become permanent after three years of probation, and they can then be permanently housed as an employee within the university for life with no credible output for its development. In high-class universities, even professors are sacked simply because they do not perform to the needs of the universities and the jobs expected from their ranks. Thus, all academic positions in the university should be continuously subject to revision, assessment, and appraisal, allowing the candidate to develop themselves to their vision and goals. If there are no adequate students in a particular education program, why should the public money support those staff who cannot revise their education programs to become famous?

Staff promotion schemes cannot be generalised and need to be discipline specific. Unfortunately, the UGC tries to generalise everything, which only has a negative impact. Like in developed countries, staff members should be able to research and become financially sound by commercialising their work. This should be promoted by commercialisation arms installed within the university framework.

### What is a good university?

We need to be able to recognise our good universities openly. The excellent learning environment, research output, student employment post qualification and popularity among students are generally at the forefront of this assessment. However, key performance indicators of a university expanded on several aspects needed by a good university.

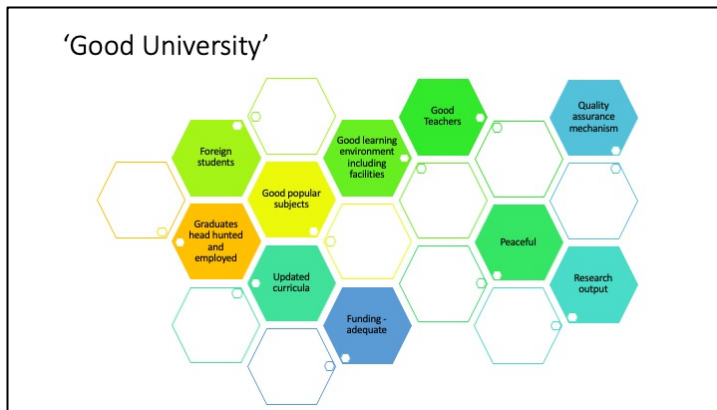


Figure 7 A fraction of what we should be looking for in a good university.

QA of the education system is necessary for the development of a country. QA is an investment for a nation too. Self-motivational mechanics for universities are needed in Sri Lanka. Universities offering degrees based on unsupervised assignments in Sri Lanka should be banned.

Teaching techniques, currently often understood to require investment in staff who provide lectures and other intensive forms of instruction, can be changed to involve active learners. They can be facilitated and undertake much of their learning while interacting with other learners. The list of possible ways of doing things differently is substantial. Emphasise learning, not teaching. Let the teacher be only a facilitator in the learning process.

### Recommendations

1. Attracting local and international students shall be the respective universities' responsibility, not the UGC's. Thus, UGC should not forcefully allocate students to universities that the students have not applied for. This crucial quality assurance activity must be implemented to allow a natural mechanism to weed out out-of-date and poor-quality education programs. This will enable a means to ensure and promote good universities and stop wasting money on universities that waste time.

### Non State higher education providers

There are several non-state higher education providers in Sri Lanka. They are considerably cheaper than going abroad and can be upgraded to become a national asset. These include private degree awarding institutes established since the 1990s (e.g. SLIIT), local Institutes affiliated with universities abroad and Universities established by an act of Parliament (e.g. Ocean University, Pali Campus and Kotelawala Defence University).

Sadly, the quality assurance of these universities is not uniform. The QA council of the UGC is accountable only for the 17 state universities and none of the others. The QA program of the UGC itself is not without its drawback due to its design of being under the UGC governance. UGC QA council conducts its quality assurance via panels (that do not formally include student or staff feedback). At the end of the first cycle of QA worked between 2015-22, of the 17, only three state universities were ranked A. International reviewers, 1 per panel per institute, were appointed, and their critics were very objective. This suggests the need for our improvement is higher than our KPIs recognise.

Having no national benchmarking of university education programs for all subjects is a significant issue that hampers the quality of the programs. Some minimum standards have been developed but not implemented. The political interest is minimal in promoting the university QA program. One example is that Universities were established under the act of Parliament. These universities have no mechanism for quality assurance. Thus, the state of our universities where producing unemployable graduates is accepted as the norm.

Furthermore, no QA is implemented upon overseas affiliated universities that extract our students and money. Thus, several such programs offered in Sri Lanka also is unregulated.

A bill of Higher Education to regularise QA, drafted by the Ministry of Education, is still in limbo. Some people in the ranks of our university administration are not very keen on establishing QA..

### *Recommendation*

1. We must Commission quality assurance at the national level for all education programs, undergraduate and postgraduate and state and private universities. State universities are passive at the moment as there is no motivation for anyone to show innovation for development.

### Enhancing University Education

Z-score cut-off points can now be considered a 'sham' that is out-of-date and should be scrapped. University student selection should be based on standard minimum criteria based on the subject, and the university added quality requirements and the demand and merit. Meritocracy for student selection is paramount for fairness and cost-effectiveness.

In this age of freely available information, universities should promote online education (e.g. lectures etc.) and provide on-site education for essential practical teaching scenarios and competence assessments that needs to be at a higher level than just memory recall. Some examinations can also be conducted online without the candidates needing to be physically present at the university. This educational modification will create sufficient spaces in the existing universities for more students to study. There is no need for students to be residents in universities throughout the whole education program.

Alumni should be allowed to engage with the universities to share their knowledge, experiences, suggestions and innovations to enhance university education. Sadly there is minimal effort at present by any of the universities; For example, even when current overseas alumni associations want to help, they have to jump through many hurdles and sometimes only be considered a nuisance by the officials.

Building the image of each university in Sri Lanka through marketing is vital in attracting the best students and enhancing its appearance and ranking. This should be achieved through an official PR advocacy linked with a local marketing office at the university, similar to the world's top universities such as Harvard or Oxford.

Any number of evaluations do not support the quality of a degree; there are other factors we need to consider.

Investment in new technology is vital, but this can take advantage of tools that cut costs. Books, for example, are one of the significant costs of any university. New e-readers mean learners do not need

to access a physical library because they can browse online for what they need and then download the text at virtually no cost. Once laboriously created and updated by staff, course materials can be digitised and rapidly edited. Access can be gained to the best material and best team in the world by using technology.

### Innovation and research – a lot to improve.

Research and innovation are not just funding opportunities. Still, they must promote the output of good research, publications, and innovations in the most profitable way for the researchers. This is what is needed by the university and the country and should be in the minds of the University administrators. Sadly, this is not the case. Research funding within the university is grossly inadequate and poorly supervised and assisted. Research allowance is based on flimsy grounds without assessing what is being done.

Our national universities have a lot of space maintained by public funding but underused. The universities should be permitted to hire their space, earn extra money, and use it to install many education programs. The traditional separation of universities in the faculties and departments does not have to be strict border control. Standard education models can be shared between faculties in one location, improving quality and cost-effectiveness.

Sadly, all building contracts proposed within universities are subject to covert political interests partly for dishonest gains for themselves and officials of the same calibre. Often, such building programs are prioritised without improving education programs, libraries, or interested facilities the students and staff need to promote their education and quality. Structural developments of political interest should not be favoured without a strict feasibility assessment. Sadly, there are 17 state universities in Sri Lanka facing enormous hardships. The politicians are never interested in doing anything about it as they have no personal benefits. But, opening and building another new one in the corner greatly benefits the shrewd politicians and their stooges but not the country or people.

The use of appropriate markers to assess universities is essential. For example, in political science, for instance, in Sri Lanka, there is hardly any research judging by the scarcity of output. But can we measure the competency of political science graduates by research output alone? We need to measure the values of graduates by more than one marker – how soon are they mopped up for jobs etc? What have they done after qualification? How many of them progressed upward or failed in their lives? Thus, research paper output should not be the total measure of a quality of an education program.

Research needs to be focussed on exploring matters worthy of entrepreneurship and commercialisation to make commercialisation arms viable. Research grants, therefore, should take this matter into account and not purely support epidemiological data collection again and again and again on the same subject.

### *Recommendations*

1. We need to support post-doc positions in state universities to support R&D.
2. There is no robust, established, trustworthy method to apply for a patent within the state university system. We need to clear this pathway removing the burden for inventors but sharing the profit of patenting and commercialisation fairly and equitably. This will promote innovations, and the nation will benefit from eminence and income.
3. All expansions of universities should be subject to full feasibility assessment.

## Ragging

Universities should be the seat of a country's intellect. They ought to be the wellsprings of new knowledge to the world, not just their home country. This needs an innovative mindset, a format for constructive discussion and debate, free expression of opinions, and research in both physical and social sciences. University students and staff must enjoy, at all times, the freedom to think, the freedom to speak and the freedom to write without fear or favour if they are to be productive and be an asset to the country.

Partisan politics have entered Sri Lankan universities through student unions. Political crooks have used student unions and invaded the campuses, and taken control of the students and including some so-called academics making them work for political party objectives. Research and creativity have been forced to take a back seat. Student unions hold undergrads in an iron grip. The tool used is ragging. It is not any more a solution to the social inequalities between students entering the university. Ragging today could be better described as "campus torture". It is a tool to control the new student's mindset whilst destroying our traditions, such as respect for elders, compassion and empathy, sharing, and listening; also designed to dislodge students from their parents and not seek or follow parents' advice. There is a hidden reason for not allowing to connect with lecturers in this environment of teaching imposed by rag masters.

The sexual and violent dimensions crept into ragging around the late 1960s. It has now morphed into a sophisticated professional operation. Senior students go to the extent of approaching new ones even before they enter university. They approach students from extremely poor backgrounds as they are more malleable and could be moulded easily. They are even invited for 'classes' purportedly to introduce them to first-year subjects, but what is taught is their ideology. Vulnerable students recruited with financial assistance and encouraged to become rag masters are equipped with even safe houses for this process in some instances. They also collect all new student data, home addresses, siblings' data and income levels of their parents for individual targeting and harassment and humiliation purposes, including blackmail. A ragging database is used for intimidation. Further equalization takes to task bright students. They are frowned upon as trying to attract attention and betraying others who are weaker. The very objective of university education is defeated. This psychological impediment must be removed as they stifle good students.

By the time they start their courses, they are converted. A system of espionage has also begun. Recruits give information about dissenters who are targeted for severe treatment. Some of these recruits are paid allowances for the information supplied. Ragging has become an ugly event that can be extremely violent. The practice now seems to be to create undergrads who would be malleable for demands of student unions to carry out their orders unquestioningly. The unions are, in turn, controlled by a political party. These approaches will demean the quality of the education imparted by the university. The end product will not have achieved its full potential. Many will be scarred for life, mentally, sometimes even physically.

'Ragging' has turned criminal in most Universities in Sri Lanka. When the past incidents related to ragging in the universities are scanned, many sad and pathetic incidents can be recalled where many fresh students had faced miserable outcomes. Ragging is a tool to control the new student's mind – the very antithesis of university education. The demand to conform and obey starts with the order of fresh students to do a dress code. (E.g. Women come to lectures without wearing underwear).

It is considered a way of pulling down people perceived as more privileged. Without having anyone in charge or control, it has taken on an overt physical and sexual nature today. Worse ragging is well organized, well thought out and well prepared for. It is meant to break the new student psychologically with the main aim of obedience and conformity. Sadly several students have committed suicide or succumbed to their extensive muscular injuries, faced illegal physical harassment, especially females, were forced to participate in activities as members of some political parties and were severely psychologically and sometimes physically traumatized for life and left the university education (approximately 2000 annually) due to intolerable fear and harassment and pressures of ragging.

Therefore, ragging is the ugly face of a more organized and crooked national corruption movement where shrewd politicians promote violence to maintain power for their private gains. The consequences of ragging have become a long-lasting issue, even post-qualification, which employers have taken note of. Some private employers now reject applicants who have qualified from universities where ragging was rampant. Severe ragging imposes a culture of poor adaptation, intolerance to environmental changes, and differences in opinion. Affected graduates have no personality, insight, or patience for others with opposing points of view. They have no compassion. That is not a palatable scenario private enterprises are looking for. We need graduates with social responsibility and intellectuality and not criminals.

1998 the 'Prohibition of Ragging and Other Forms of Violence in Educational Institutions Act' was passed. This law makes ragging a criminal offence punishable with a sentence of up to 10 years in prison. Despite these strong deterrents, the practice is almost the norm still. Our own politicized university administrators and the government are responsible for not enacting this to enforce it. So much so, often ragging victims are forced to withdraw their complaints of their harassment.

Student ragging is not a problem of the affected student; it reflects vulnerability within a state-owned institution. Student victims should only be considered witnesses to the event and neither the victim nor the plaintiff. Without remedial measures, our universities will become degree factories and remain unable to play the role they were created for.

Mentor schemes are a must in universities – but we do not have this as the rag masters have banned student engagement with staff. On the other hand, staff cannot be scared of students. The whole education paradigm in the university is based on staff-student mentorship. We cannot see such a scenario in any state's universities. Ragging is designed to break this staff-student bond. The government is the ultimate culprit. They consider ragging cases as a clash between two student groups, and the police are instructed to do so and not see it as a breach of national law and order despite the robust anti-ragging bill in place. Thus, the culprits go scot-free due to political interference at all levels. University staff sometimes support recruiting rag-master students back into the university even after committing gross criminal acts. These activities should be considered a violation of law and order, and such staff should equally be punished. Maintaining discipline is impossible when university staff are also double acting, supporting, or even ignoring this menace. Rag leaders are politically motivated and are sometimes trained in safe houses.

Yet, the inability to bring justice was apparent, and staff were blamed. But the real reason is the politicians who have blood in their hands in this process to promote their political missions within the campus. A strike day is a promotion event for the rag master within their political ranks. That is that bad.



*Figure 8 Ragging is not existent in the UK universities - then why is it in Sri Lanka?*

Criminality within the university should not be tolerated, and the law of the land should apply equally to any other citizen with no caveats. University disciplinary bodies who 'cover up' criminal activities should be prosecuted.

Ragging in Universities can be controlled.

#### *Recommendations*

1. Familiarising fresh students with the university environment is one effective way to prepare them to withstand and avoid the vulnerability of ragging. Sadly, even the few university new entree handbooks developed by a few individuals in the past are neither upgraded nor distributed by the same universities for reasons known to administrators themselves. A continually upgraded student handbook is a must, which can easily be distributed before the admission of new students using current technological advances.
2. The students who are qualified for university entrance must be admitted a few weeks before the due date of the commencement of the academic year. All senior students must not be allowed to come to the university premises until the due date at the beginning of the academic year. Make the new students familiarized with the area, residential hostels and halls, locations like lecture theatres, laboratories, cinema halls, canteens, recreation areas, medical centres etc. New students must be informed of offices and officers who must be contacted in emergencies. The relevant contact numbers must be made available to new students. New students must know local travelling facilities and the closest shopping, marketing, and purchasing locations. New students must learn the best transport modes in emergencies (taxi services, three-wheel services etc. and contact detail of them).
3. All academic staff members of relevant faculties must be introduced to new students, including their mentors, via a well-designed induction program. Some programs must be organized so staff members are updated on the needs, policy changes, and general topics. New students must be aware of areas and locations that must be avoided if such places are unsafe (deep river areas, hilly and slippery sites, areas with evil human characters, etc.).
4. Develop a comprehensive policy prohibiting ragging, demonstrating a strong institutional commitment to eradicate ragging. Promote a detailed induction period for the newcomers

and include sessions to highlight the importance of a culture of respect, inclusivity, and safety.

5. Implement regular educational programs on the hazards and negative impacts of ragging and its prevention and intervention strategies for the students, faculty, staff, and parents.
6. Robust confidential, accessible reporting and Support Mechanisms are needed with comprehensive awareness of reporting channels whilst ensuring the safety of victims and whistle-blowers with clear accountability of committees or staff. There need to be designated trained staff members and security handle reports. All ragging incidents should be considered criminal and should be referred to the police by the university. All incidents need thorough investigation with appropriate disciplinary and legal action. Ensure a support network for counselling, peer support, and mental health resources when needed.
7. Conduct regular monitoring and enforcement surveys amongst staff and students to identify potential ragging incidents, their format, preponderance concerning faculty, time, student types etc. and identify any precipitating factors that may need attention separately. Communicate investigation outcomes publicly to deter future incidents.
8. Collaboration with fellow universities and external anti-ragging associations or experts. This will help all install awareness campaigns, training programs and policy development. Engage alumni networks to promote positive values and discourage ragging traditions.
9. Continuous Evaluation and Improvement A. Regularly assess the effectiveness of anti-hazing initiatives B. Use anonymous surveys, focus groups, and feedback mechanisms C. Analyse data to identify trends and evaluate the impact of interventions D. Make informed adjustments to policies and programs E. Foster ongoing dialogue and engagement with the community.

### Admission delays of students have cost too much to the country.

The current university entry age, on average, is about 25 - 27 years and qualifies at the age of 30, and this is purely a matter for the government to resolve. More than 1-year delay for admission to a university is one reason that encourages students to enter private universities or go abroad.

The average age of qualifying university students should be 22-24 years. We need to get this right to make sure the country gains from its university education program with a longer working life for its graduates, supported mainly by public funds.

### *Recommendation*

1. Primary schools should start at age 4. University entry 17-18, primary qualification aged 21-22.
2. The advanced-level results should be processed within three months of the exam, and results can quickly be released (at present, university admission is 25-27). This changes the focus of students more become educational. France starts schooling at three years. GCE OL curriculum can be reduced to 2 years.
3. Biological and Physics streams could be combined at an advanced level with a modular system that can be used interchangeably for university entry. Installing three subjects at the



advanced level for university entry was ad hoc to please politicians with the wonderful political stooges we have in our academic administration. Release the AL results within two months and scrap the z-score.

4. Currently, the UGC takes seven months to release results – a tragedy. All students admitted to universities on a standard item scale may be September every year.