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# SRI LANKA ECONOMIC JOURNAL

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COMMISSION IN COLLABORATION WITH SRI LANKA ECONOMIC ASSO-  
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SRI LANKA ECONOMIC ASSOCIATION

## SRI LANKA ECONOMIC JOURNAL

Articles, comments and reviews for publication, and books for review should be addressed to either the Editor, Sri Lanka Economic Journal, No. 61, Carmel Road, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka or to the General Secretary, Sri Lanka Economic Association, Mr. Karunasena Kodithuwakku, University of Sri Jayawardenapura, Gangodawila, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka. Correspondence regarding membership and subscription should reach the Treasurer, Sri Lanka Economic Association, No. 61, Carmel Road, Colombo 3, Sri Lanka.

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This issue of the Journal contains the proceedings of a seminar held in October 1986 on "The Teaching of Economics in the Universities of Sri Lanka" which was jointly sponsored by the University Grants Commission and the Sri Lanka Economic Association. The expenses in connection with the Seminar and the cost of publication of this edition of the Journal were fully borne by the University Grants Commission. The Sri Lanka Economic Association gratefully acknowledges the assistance and co-operation received from the Chairman and Members of the University Grants Commission and its officials. This issue of the Journal was edited by Dr. H. N. S. Karunatilake.

The text in this section is extremely faint and illegible. It appears to be a list or a series of entries, possibly related to a historical or scientific record. The text is mirrored across the page, suggesting it might be bleed-through from the reverse side.

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SEMINAR  
ON  
"THE TEACHING OF ECONOMICS IN THE UNIVERSITIES OF  
SRI LANKA"

WELCOME ADDRESS

by

Prof. A. D. V. DE S. INDRARATNA

Deans, members of the Economics teaching staff, members of the Sri Lanka Economic Association, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all to this seminar on "The Teaching of Economics in the Universities of Sri Lanka". As you may be aware, the University Grants Commission had been quite concerned for some time with the teaching of social sciences in our universities. The UGC has from time to time heard and seen reports of how teaching standards have been falling in our universities, sometimes due to factors beyond the control of universities and sometimes due to factors within their control. So the UGC had thought it fit to look into this problem, and to see how best the UGC could help the universities in the improvement of the teaching of economics at the universities, and thereby raise the standards of the graduates that we turn out. The UGC, therefore, through the Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences, has thought it fit to take certain measures, one of which is to host this seminar in collaboration with the Sri Lanka Economic Association. In this seminar, as you could see from the programme which has been put out, we are trying to see how teaching has been done in the past, how it is being done now, what had gone wrong, if at all, with our teaching over the last thirty to forty years, what were the factors beyond the control of the universities, what are the factors that we could have controlled and what were the symptoms which we could have cured. It is by tailoring this seminar to focus its attention on these aspects, that we would be able to throw some light on these problems which would be helpful to the universities, and our teachers of economics. I must emphasize here that this seminar was got up not to find fault with anybody, but with the genuine belief that we would be able—the UGC and the Sri Lanka Economic Association—to help our teachers and our universities in the teaching of economics. This probably would be followed by similar seminars on the teaching of other social science subjects.

I am sure all these problems and constraints will be pointed out in detail by the participant speakers. In order to economise on time I will now summarize certain current trends relevant to this theme. Firstly, the proliferation of Departments of Economics in the universities has created a large number of vacancies for teaching positions. But owing to availability of more attractive employment opportunities, offered by the State and private institutions, universities have not been able to retain the best scholars as it used to be in the past upto about 1960. In this respect Departments of Economics face a serious manpower problem. In the entire university system PhDs in economics are very scarce, perhaps less than even ten. Thus teaching is affected as regards content, analysis and quality. It appears that the bulk of the teaching for the "Special" and "General" degrees is done by relatively inexperienced junior teachers.

Secondly, economics as a subject has faced administrative changes and several subjects which once were under its umbrella have been established as independent Departments namely. political science, statistics and sociology. Further, students seemed to be getting more attracted to these newly created job oriented Departments of Commerce, Business Studies and Management, reducing the number of student enrolment in economics.

Thirdly, consequent to the implementation of Swabasha as the media of teaching in the universities, the availability of reading materials (books, journals, documents) has been seriously restricted. The undergraduates have been forced to use the limited resources or to depend entirely on notes to pass the examination. They did little reading for the degree, but crammed the notes; a change in the reading habit and a marked decrease in individual effort to gain knowledge.

Fourthly, tied up with the alleged falling standards is the complaint of the poor quality of the graduates and thus their low employable potential. This should be a point of grave concern for the Universities requiring the study and implementation of remedial measures.

Finally I am sure this Seminar will provide a forum for discussion of these relevant issues and problems and the outcome expressed in suggestions and recommendations, a useful basis for effective action by the Universities and the University Grants Commission.

I wish this Seminar every success.



## DISCUSSION

Prof. B. L. Panditaratne:

Prof. Indraratna outlined certain disciplinary rules in which he has taken a personal interest to implement them to ensure that academic standards were maintained. This interest on the part of the Head of the Department becomes very necessary particularly when the Departments are large as regards both staff and students. There is the possibility of a breakdown in the system if such vigilance is not forthcoming from the Head and readily responded with the co-operation of the staff. Let me cite a case in Peradeniya. We had a case of an assistant lecturer who was absenting himself from lectures and tutorials without the approval from the Professor/Head. This was detected and this assistant lecturer was dismissed and this certainly served as a warning to all others. Erratic behaviour if not checked could be contagious and affect adversely academic standards.

Prof. Indraratna:

I just want to raise a point as regards the rigidity and lack of flexibility in the Departments, refusing to accept teachers in other Departments to teach in their own subjects. If the academic talents are more effectively deployed—I refer to the availability of history teachers and others competent to teach economic history in the Department of Economics.—this is done in Great Britain very successfully. Similarly, I am sure those competent in culture, languages, religion and civilization could be mobilized to teach the relevant subject areas in Anthropology and Sociology and thus fill certain gaps in the staffing deficiencies of the Department of Sociology. It is time that we think in terms of mobilizing our manpower resources on an intersectoral interdisciplinary basis than on the present subject-department basis.

Prof. Panditaratna:

I have my reservations about the staff-student ratios. Prof. Indraratna is very competent on this subject, but I shall urge him to have a second look after a dialogue with the universities.

# TEACHING OF ECONOMICS—PAST AND PRESENT

by

A. D. V. DE S. INDRARATNA

## Teaching of Economics in the Early Fifties

I commenced teaching of economics in 1952. Economics was treated less mathematically then than now, and I must say it was more difficult to teach economics non-mathematically than mathematically. It was also more difficult to teach then, than now, because audio-visual methods such as overhead projectors were less popular.

Teaching of economics at the university level was and should be different from teaching at the school level. The main objective of lectures at the university level is to stimulate thinking and inculcate a sense of search for knowledge. The aim of university education is to train the young mind to search for, select, judge, evaluate and decide. These are vital qualities necessary to make people socially useful and economically productive, which is the ultimate goal of university education. This applies to the teaching of economics in as much as to any other subject. This is very different from teaching at the school level—which is pedagogical—to teach students to muster facts and gather knowledge. This difference between university teaching and school teaching must be borne in mind by both teacher and student alike if university teaching is to be successful.

This is why teaching economics in the first year is crucial. This is where the undergraduate has to be weaned away from methods of learning he has been used to for about 12 years. During his first year he is also very passive and receptive to innovation. This is the very reason why the first year teaching should be undertaken as far as practicable by the more senior staff of the Department.

What has been happening in these respects in the past and what is happening now?

### **My Experience as an Undergraduate.**

Our first year economics (i.e. in 1948) was taught by very senior people. It was in King George's Hall A, There must have been less than 200 students in all. The Professor himself took lectures in Principles of Economics; in his absence, another senior lecturer Dr. N. K. Sarkar. Although they did not specifically mention the difference between the teaching at the university and school level, we automatically noticed the difference. It was difficult to take down verbatim what they said. We had to think with them and take down what we considered important in respect of what we wanted to read further. A reading list before commencement of the actual lecture was a characteristic then. Immediately after the lecture, we used to chase after the lecturer if we had anything to clarify. Then we used to rush to the library where the seating was limited.

### **My Own Experience as a Teacher.**

I used to maintain these traditions after I became the Head of Department in Colombo. I always made it a point to take the first year lectures in economics. In my very first lecture, I used to emphasise the difference between university and school teaching. I emphasised that the objective of the lectures was more guidance, while great reliance had to be placed on their reading, discussions (tutorials/seminars) and so on. I went to the extent of insisting from them that they should leave aside their pen and paper and listen and try to understand what was spoken rather than try to take down verbatim notes. A reading list always preceded the lecture. This way of lecturing was first resented. Later on, however, they were reconciled to it. Teaching, to them, became both interesting and challenging.

This situation obviously changed when relatively junior staff were put in charge of the first year classes. They were inexperienced and frightened of large classes. Therefore, they did not think and lecture, fearing they would make mistakes and be ridiculed by the audience. Therefore, they used to carry with them full lecture notes and dictate them to students. Sometimes these notes happened to be what they themselves had received from their predecessor, not even brought upto date—sometimes even the same jokes were repeated. With their heads bent, students used to take down these notes faithfully. They also gradually got used to the view that if they reproduced these notes at examinations they could very successfully pass them. Very little outside reading

was done. Lecturers who did this became the most popular and students demanded this even from senior hands who still wanted to maintain the university tradition. The result of this change of practice was the production of half-baked graduates with limited knowledge unable to think and without analytical minds.

### **Factors Which Have Affected Teaching**

There are two major factors which affected teaching at universities in and after the late fifties.

- (i) Large numbers opting for economics.
- (ii) Switch-over to national languages as the media of instruction.

### **Large Classes**

Free education was introduced in 1945. university doors were wide open in and after 1946. When the University of Ceylon was established in 1942 there were only a total of 904 students. Between 1942/43 and 1945/46 numbers grew slowly, annually by 5 to 6 percent. In 1946/47, however it increased by 22 per cent over the previous year to 1294. The increased inflow into universities resulting from free education was reinforced with gradual switch-over to Sinhala and Tamil the media of instruction in schools as from 1947. The total enrolment which as had doubled to 2471 in ten years from 1946/47, doubled again in a matter of four years to 4723 in 1960/61 with the commencement of entry into universities of students educated in Sinhala and Tamil media. The largest increase was into arts and of which the largest numbers came in to do economics. The pressure for university places had grown so much and so quickly that it was not possible to manage with one single university. As an ad hoc measure, Vidyodaya and Vidyalandara had been converted to universities.

The immediate outcome, in respect of teaching, of these rapidly increasing numbers, was the constrained facilities of staff and space for teaching. The output of good graduates in economics did not expand in proportion to the rapidly increasing intake. New universities had to recruit and be satisfied with second-rate graduates as teachers. They were forced to recruit even third class graduates into their teaching staff, whereas the older university still withstood that and stuck to first or good second class graduates. Large classes in economics with a relatively large number of assistant lecturers with not so good degrees were the ultimate result.

## Teaching to Large Classes

When less than 200 were in a class of economics in the forties and early fifties, more than 500 became the characteristic number in the late fifties and thereafter. In one year 1965/66, there were a record number of nearly 2000 in the economics class in Colombo. I had to lecture to this number at the Grand Stand of the Turf Club with a public address system. Individual or a personal touch with the student became remote. With high student/teacher ratios resulting from student numbers increasing much more than in proportion to the teaching staff, tutorial classes, the only medium by which the personal touch with students could be maintained, became less frequent, if not altogether absent, or they became as large as some of the lecture classes in the earlier era. Even the few tutorial classes which could be held were manned largely by inexperienced assistant lecturers. In our undergraduate days, we looked forward to our tutorial classes. There were only a few students in them.

A tutorial was read and thoroughly discussed and the other few tutorials not read in class and discussed were thoroughly gone through by the tutor who very carefully graded them. Those grades mattered very much and if any tutorial scored 'A' it used to be circulated among all the others in the group. Today—does this happen? There are large numbers in tutorial classes. Tutors are relatively inexperienced. Some professors may even think it is below their dignity to take tutorial classes. The tutors may get as many tutorials as possible read within the hour to avoid having to read them at home, with hardly any critical discussion of them. Others not so read may not be either seen at all or are haphazardly glanced through and graded. Inadequacy of lecturing due to large numbers has to be adequately compensated by proper tutorial discussion. This does not seem to happen now.

## Teaching Methods, Reading Lists and Hand-outs

In order to make teaching to large classes more effective, modern audio visual methods have to be substituted for the use of black boards etc. This means preparation of transparencies for overhead projectors. Large classes also mean a greater use of hand-outs. When I used to lecture in economics in the New Arts Theatre in Colombo, I used the projector and transparencies quite a bit. Reading lists were roneoed and distributed. To what extent do these happen now? The distribution of reading lists and other hand-outs is quite customary in foreign universities, I have visited, even in relatively small classes. This practice should be introduced if absent, and encouraged and intensified if practised only to a limited extent.

## Teaching in the National Languages.

When teaching was in English the student in economics had access to a vast amount of knowledge in books and journals. In the forties, as I said before, classes were small, teaching was in the English medium and experienced senior dons took the lectures in particular in the first year where the student had to be weaned away from the school to the university tradition. A comprehensive reading list preceded a lecture. Books and journals were available in the library. Students relied on their reading, treating lecture notes as guide lines. Thus it was possible to maintain high standards and economics graduates who came out of the university were professionally very competent people.

When the media of instruction were switched-over to Sinhala and Tamil simultaneously with large numbers entering to do economics, the situation became very different. In 1960/61 when economics was being taught for the first time in Sinhala I remember, there were about 700 in the class, in the Arts-Theatre in Peradeniya. There was only one book in Sinhala *Arthika Vidya Pravesaya* of the late Dr I. D. S. Weerawardena—my *Mila Niyaya* came out in 1962/63.

Teaching to such large classes in Sinhala without books and periodicals in Sinhala was not half as easy as teaching to small classes in the English medium with ample books and journals. Lectures have to be much more comprehensive than the lectures in the English medium. In other words, lectures had to cease to be mere guidelines. This implied more home work for the lecturer. It also meant reading out relevant sections from English texts and explaining them in the national medium. This might have happened in the early sixties when the numbers were within tolerable limits and lectures were handled by fairly senior dons with responsibility. Numbers were not so bad as to have prevented any tutorial classes. But education gradually deteriorated and numbers became so vast that it was difficult to have tutorial classes regularly. Even if they were held, they had to have many more than the optimum numbers in such classes. Most of them had to be manned by relatively junior people. Naturally the quality of teaching deteriorated and standards started falling.

### Lectures vs Tutorial/Seminars

Lectures and tutorials/seminars are the two chief methods of university teaching of economics. When large numbers enter the subject, tutorials or seminars become more important. Paradoxically, they became more difficult then. I used to solve this dilemma partially this way. I used to have 15-20 in a tutorial group; get them to meet once a fortnight or in three-weeks instead

of weekly, get two or three students to write the tutorials in rotation, discuss one to two of them thoroughly in the class and scrutinize the others at home; a grading was given and both specific and general comments were given justifying the particular grade given. In the late sixties and seventies there were about forty to fifty tutorial classes in the first year. I always made a point to take a few of them in order to indicate to the students and to the junior staff the great importance that was attached to tutorial classes. Occasionally I, even checked some of the tutorial essays corrected by my junior colleagues to ensure that they do a thorough job of it. I in fact, occasionally went round to ensure that tutorial classes were going on smoothly. I do not know what checks and balances are exercised today to make tutorial work meaningful and purposive.

I have already mentioned that when classes are large and are in the national media, lectures have to be much more comprehensive than when classes are small and are in the English medium. It is desirable that experienced and qualified staff handle these lectures. Even if it is compelling to have some junior people handle them the Professor of Economics can ensure by several means that they do a thorough job of it. Advise them to prepare reading lists with relevant sections indicated, keep files of lecture notes or lecture outline in the Department (which would be made available for inspection by the Professor if requested). I introduced this practice in Colombo to probationary assistant lecturers and it worked well. They benefitted from it as well as the students. I can recall how probationary assistant lecturers used to come to me and ask whether they could add anything other than what they have done into the reading lists prepared by them. In order to work such schemes successfully there must be both mutual trust and understanding and mutual respect between the junior staff and the senior teachers. Then they would be convinced that the Professor is dedicated to his job and is doing these in the interests of students and raising the standards of teaching of his colleagues; they would not resent such practices.

### **Syllabuses and their Coverage in Lectures and Examination.**

In order to improve the quality of teaching each course should have carefully formulated syllabuses scrutinized by the experts in the subject and discussed and approved by boards of study in the faculties. This would enable the teachers of the respective subjects to prepare the outlines of their lectures covering the entire syllabus. The lecturer must arrange his time schedule in such a way that the number of hours assigned to the respective course is adequate to cover the syllabus.

At the commencement of a course of lectures the students must be given access to this syllabus and given a reading list pertaining to each section of that syllabus. This happened to some extent in the fifties and sixties. I do not know to what extent it is happening now. My experience as the Director of Planning and Research of the UGC is that some departments do not have syllabuses for some of their economics courses at all, because my request for such syllabuses have had negative responses.

If there are syllabuses and the students are made aware of them, then it is possible to advise them to read in relation to them and even cover the ground that may be omitted by the lecturer owing to lack of time or any other exigency.

It has been heard that some lecturers cover only a part of the syllabus, or areas they are expected to cover even in the absence of a written syllabus. Then the examination questions are set only on that limited area. This is partly to cover his own deficiency and partly to retain his popularity. No more damage can be done to the cause of university education than by resorting to such practices. If our teaching staff tries to cover up their inadequacies by such practices, they would only help to turn out graduates of very poor quality which only would make the country poorer of the skills so necessary for its sustained social and economic development.

### **Concluding Remarks**

The Corporate Plan for University Education has targeted for a reduced intake into Arts. The total intake into Arts will be reduced to 1750 by 1988/89. No faculty will have more than 600, including even admissions to commerce and management studies. The total numbers doing economics in the first year will once again fall below 500. With the present staff numbers in the Departments of Economics, it should be possible to handle such student numbers with adequate provision for lectures and tutorials. It should be possible to upgrade teaching and raise standards with these numbers if remedies which have been suggested here are adopted. Let first year classes be handled by more senior staff.

Every course must have a carefully formulated syllabus which must be made available to the students. The teaching staff must prepare reading lists and hand-outs for distribution among students. The indispensability of reading must be inculcated into the minds of students. Audio-visual methods must be used for teaching. Regular tutorials must be arranged and greater



attention paid than now to tutorial discussions and grading. Schedules of lectures must be so planned as to adequately cover the syllabuses. Examinations must adequately cover the syllabuses. Professors of Economics must exercise greater supervisory influence over their junior colleagues.

### **Prof. Indraratna**

Now I wish to take up some of the questions raised by Mr. Tilakaratne because others have more or less echoed what I have said. Mr. Tilakaratne said that things had changed and therefore the lecturers had been dictating more comprehensive notes than before. The point I am making is that the lecturers have to give guidelines in the context of large classes, and in the context of the change of media, without giving the impression to students that they should take down every word that the lecturer says. I did not at any time suggest that they should leave the class without a scrap of notes. What I wanted to emphasize is that they have to learn to think first and take down what is important. They would have a set of notes which would serve as a set of guidelines for their further reading. I would like to react to some of the things Chandra (Dr.(Mrs) Rodrigo) said with most of which I agree. She questioned whether it is true that there is any course without a syllabus. She implied that there is at least in the lecturer's mind a syllabus. What I suggested is that there must be a syllabus made available to students. In what form and how one does that is entirely a matter which every lecturer has to decide for himself, whether you put it up on the notice board, or whether in the first lecture you give the syllabus out, or whether you give a handout. The student then can read, as I mentioned later on in the course of my presentation, even if the lecturer omits to cover certain parts of the syllabus due to factors which are entirely beyond his control. The student must be made to pay the penalty for not having read on those areas which the lecturer had not been able to cover. This does not happen now. Chandra said that she gives the reading list out. She almost confirms the point I made. This is the difference between an experienced teacher and a not-so-experienced teacher. She is one of the experienced teachers of economics we have today, and she is doing what should be done. All that I am suggesting is that the others should follow it. If the juniors are not doing that, let the senior teachers be an example; guide them how to do that.

The other problem of a lack of an adequate back-ground in english and mathematics is real. As I told you, the teaching of economics mathematically may be both simple and easier to the teacher, but learning economics is more difficult for the student if he has not got the mathematics background. Chandra asked who should do this and who should be responsible. My own suggestion is that mathematics for economists should be made a compulsory subject in the first year. If the first year mathematics is taught adequately, at least linear algebra, differentiation and integration, the sort of mathematics that you need the student to know; introduce the student to a book like Allen's "Mathematics for Economists." All that I am saying is that they should be given a dose of english and mathematics which would be adequate for them to read and understand the relevant books and journals. Dr. Dharmasena raised a very valid point about the bias of syllabuses. I agree that economics syllabus or any other syllabus, may be in history or geography, must have a local bias; must be related to the local situations.

Even when one talks about the law of diminishing returns, it is much better to talk about our paddy fields rather than of something else. That is why I said that syllabuses must be very carefully formulated, discussed by experts, shown to practitioners who would be able to give valuable advise based on experience. Some departments may have very comprehensive syllabuses which are not suitable for the local scenario. Some syllabuses may be verbatim copied from university hand books. One can collect 10 university hand books and gleaning different sections from them prepare a detailed syllabus which no one may know from where it has come. This, however, may not at all suit local needs. This should be avoided. We have enough competent, professionally qualified people who can formulate syllabuses to suit our requirements.

Dr. S. S. Colombage

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen, I was an assistant lecturer at the Peradeniya University some time ago and subsequently I joined the Central Bank and since then I have been a visiting lecturer at various universities at different times. Prof. Indraratna has raised some very interesting issues and I think he had provided a sound basis not only for this particular session but for the whole programme. On the basis of his paper I would like to focus on a few points and I hope that my colleagues in the universities will make considerable contribution to this discussion.

As pointed out by Prof. Indraratna, I think one major problem in teaching as well as studying economics now, is that we are compelled to use mathematical tools to a considerable extent in teaching economics. Unlike in the early 1950's or 60's, economists in various other countries, particularly in developed countries, have begun to use mathematics as a major tool of economic analysis. Basically these tools are applied in macro-economics as well as in micro-economics. So students with a limited mathematical background have a difficulty in understanding and applying these tools in economic analysis. Therefore, as pointed out by Prof. Indraratna, I think it is essential that students who follow economics should have a sound background in mathematics, as these mathematical tools are applied particularly for macro-economic modelling in developed as well as under-developed countries. Therefore these tools are important not only for academic purposes, but also for practical purposes. For instance, in national planning exercise, we in Sri Lanka have a macro-economic framework and in that framework we use some not very comprehensive mathematical techniques but some kind of macro-economic framework based on some basic mathematical tools. So this aspect is particularly important. These mathematical tools are also used for simulation on forecasting purposes.

Therefore, the economist has a positive role to play in modern macro-economic exercises as well as in the macro-economic planning processes. I think it is important to teach these mathematical techniques, econometrics and various other mathematical tools in this area. Secondly, as pointed out by Prof. Indraratna, I think now-a-days students depend largely on lecture notes, or lectures presented by the particular teacher. I can remember one of my teachers who is not with us now, Prof. H. A. De. S. Gunasekera, did not allow us to take down any notes. His argument was that you cannot concentrate on what the teacher says. We were not allowed to take down any lecture notes during the lecture sessions and also we were under his supervision as well as Prof. Hewavitharana and Dr. Rodrigo. We were compelled to do our references and this was more or less a compulsory exercise for those students who followed special degree courses. Therefore, we had to do a considerable amount of reading during that period. But since then, I think things have changed a little bit.

With my experience as a visiting lecturer I have noticed that more or less the students continue to depend on the lecturer and they are not very keen to do their references. I think we should encourage the students to do their references; the lack of discussion facilities is also a problem. I have noticed that in foreign universities, as pointed out by Prof. Indraratna, it is a common feature when you follow postgraduate programmes in the United Kingdom or in the United States, the students are required to attend various workshops on various topics such as for instance 'Inflation' and we were supposed to present papers. I think it is high time that the authorities initiate this type of seminars at various levels in our universities as well. Further I think again the largeness of economics classes is also a problem. Particularly, it applies in the case of the general degree classes. We have fairly large classes even now. Finally, still we haven't produced a sufficient number of text books in Sinhala and Tamil media and I think this causes problems for students who follow economics in those two languages.

# TEACHING OF ECONOMICS AT PERADENIYA : PROBLEMS AND CONSTRAINTS

by

Prof. B. HEWAVITHARANA

How the subject of economics fares at Peradeniya can be examined in terms of the different factors in the two processes of teaching and learning economics. These factors may be identified as—the numerical strength and quality of staff, the quality of students, the structure of courses and their content, availability of library facilities and their use, and lastly, a factor peculiar to Peradeniya, life and activity in the halls of residence. An inquiry into the trends and current status of these factors and their causes would throw light on the fate of standards and would throw up suggestions for solutions and improvements.

## 1. The Numerical Strength and Quality of Staff

(a) *Staff—Student Ratio*—The student population to be catered to by the economics teaching staff includes the students of economics at all levels and those who offer statistics as a general degree subject. The present ratio of economics staff to this body of students for the Sinhala stream together with the English stream is 1 : 43 and for the Tamil stream it is 1 : 40. Besides the students identified above there are other students, especially the students in the B. Com. programme who offer four papers in economics in the different years. Inclusive of these the staff student ratio deteriorates further to a level of about 1 : 50 in the sinhala and the tamil media. Judged by the ratio of 1 : 18 that has been observed for social science in universities of advanced countries, and one that features in U.G.C. documents as a desirable one or a norm, Peradeniya's teaching staff strength in relation to the number of students is pathetically low. Thus, in some recent years tutorial groups in Sinhala and Tamil had to be in the size of 20—25 for the General Arts Qualifying and the General Arts degree and in the size of 15—20 for the Special Arts Qualifying and the Special Arts degree. Classes with such numbers are too unwieldy for tutorial discussions.

\* A combined figure for the two streams because the bulk of the work in the English medium is done by the teachers in the Sinhala medium. There is no separate staff for the English medium.

An expansion of staff aiming at a reasonable staff-student ratio is needed. However, if the experience of recent years is anything to go by, a misapplication of the above mentioned norm of 1 : 18 could in itself prove to be an obstacle for such expansion. In examining cadre strengths in terms of this norm, the UGC has been in the practice of lumping together the different arts subjects at Peradeniya ignoring the very wide subject-wise differences in the staff-student ratio. This practice is discriminatory towards economics and militates against a satisfaction of its felt need for cadre expansion. The proper procedure should be to consider the cadre in economics separately from other subjects and also in terms of the two main media of instruction.

There are certain other aspects of this ratio worth noting. At present the ratio of teachers with postgraduate qualifications and or teaching/research experience of more than six years to students is in the region of 1 : 94 in the sinhala medium and 1 : 200 in the tamil medium. This is a reflection of the severe imbalance that exists in the structure of qualifications and experience of the teaching staff. The ratio varies widely among the individual teachers. One reason for this is specialisation. For example, a lecturer in statistics who has no economics background will come into contact with only those students who offer courses in statistics. Another is the language constraint as in the case of a teacher not so proficient in any of the swabhasha languages who would do more work in the small english stream than in the large swabhasha streams. Thus the distribution of students among staff is much skewed showing a pattern of concentration.

An alternative solution to the staff-student ratio problem is a reduction in the number of students. A reduction in admissions to the Arts Faculty, Peradeniya, is visualised in the corporate plan prepared by the UGC. An inquiry into the wisdom of this is outside the scope of this paper, but there are two things that may be noted. First, the proposed reduction may not very materially improve the ratio. Secondly, a reduction in the intake at Peradeniya is associated with an increase in intake elsewhere where the conditions may be much worse. Thus from a national point of view it is no solution.

In the meantime, a new problem has cropped up since 1985 due to a very large number of admissions specific to certain subjects which are normally taught in the tamil medium. Many of these students also offer economics and as a result a serious disparity has arisen between medium-wise distribution of the staff and that of the students. A staff that has been structured on the lines of about 70% for sinhala and english media and about 30% for Tamil medium in conformity with medium-wise distribution of the students hitherto is now called upon to cater to a student population which is rapidly moving towards a structural pattern of 45 per cent for Tamil medium and 55 per cent for sinhala and english media. A continuance of this admissions policy which commenced in 1985 would pose very serious problems to the teaching of economics in the tamil medium at Peradeniya. Peradeniya is and should continue to be a national university teaching economics in all three media. But let not the medium-wise distribution of students be out of alignment with that of the staff.

From the foregoing it is clear that the staff-student ratio should be improved and that the way to it lies in an increase in the number of staff. A reduction in the intake of students is neither an acceptable nor a meaningful solution. The staff-student ratio should be looked at separately for economics, not mixing up with other subjects, and also separately for the two main media of instruction. Going on aggregated ratios for arts faculty subjects or for a group of social science subjects in deciding on cadre provisions would be misleading and highly inimical to the interests of teaching economics. Great caution needs to be exercised in certain subject specific admissions for these have serious implications for the teaching of economics

(b) *Work Load of the Staff*—This is a question not only of the number of hours of work but also of the number of different one year courses (papers and subjects) that a teacher has to do. The policy has been to entrust, as far as possible, the courses of key importance and those needing to be handled with some expertise, to the teachers with experience and or post-graduate qualifications. Thus in due course with the loss of staff at the senior level (a problem that will be discussed below) the remaining senior teachers have each been called upon to handle a wide and varied range of subjects: Some examples of such spreading out by individual senior teachers are—

- (i) Monetary Theory, Comparative Economic Development, Political Economy.
- (ii) Macro Economics, International Economics, Agricultural Economics.
- (iii) Applied Economics, Monetary Institutions and Problems, Advanced Economic Analysis.
- (iv) Economics (GAQ), Quantitative Techniques of Management (for B.Com. students), Corporate Finance and Planning (for B.Com.), Advanced Economic Analysis.

Spreading out in this fashion could be frustrating for those senior teachers who wish to concentrate on and to develop their special fields of interest. It is also not conducive to the further development of the individual subject areas.

For the senior teachers in the sinhala medium the number of different one year courses (papers) to be taught is on the average three and with the parallel lectures in english which they have to handle the number of lecture hours alone is about 12 per week. A teacher in the tamil medium has to do about four or five different papers. Much of the supervision work arising from undergraduate dissertations falls on the senior teachers because it is to them that the students tend to go for advice and guidance. Further, a senior teacher has about three M.A. students to supervise and all this put together amounts to a considerable amount of additional work.

In thinking of ways of reducing the work load some look askance at the small english stream and question why it should be given the same attention as the other two media in terms of teaching time. One time saving device suggested is to have combined lectures for sinhala and english medium students with the teacher alternating between sinhala and english providing instant translations. It is doubtful that this would result in any material saving on time or any reduction in the workload. At any rate it would be only the very experienced teachers with developed bilingual abilities who would be able to accomplish such feats while maintaining the continuity of ideas and without distracting the minds of the students. Another suggestion is that the english medium students could do with shortened or abridged versions of the lectures because they can fill in the gaps through the library references which they are capable



of doing. Whatever the practicability and merits of these suggestions are, they all spring from the initial questioning of the small english stream's right to equal treatment. Peradeniya as stated before is a national University offering instruction in economics in all three media and each student admitted to it should have the same claim as the others on its facilities irrespective of the size of the language stream to which he or she belongs. Further, the english stream, though a very small one, has always carried some good students and almost all graduates. From this stream in the last six years have been snapped up to fill some important positions. The demand for graduates from this stream is high and will remain high partly on account of their ability to work in english. It would be an injustice and also a great pity if their quality were to suffer through a resort to work-load reducing devices which may quite unintentionally in practice border upon discriminating treatment.

Having to work on a time table which requires dividing ones time in two places, Peradeniya and Dumbara, makes a work load of even 10 hours, inclusive of some tutorials, more strenuous than what is suggested by the number of hours alone. Just two hours of work per day to be carried out in the two places would exhaust the whole day, much of it being spent on travelling. It is not possible to divide and allocate the staff permanently to the two places. Some of the staff must necessarily continue to shuttle between Peradeniya and Dumbara and the time factor involved should receive due cognizance in deciding on cadre provisions. At present this factor is ignored and the staff is treated as working in one place.

- (c) *Quality of the Staff*—Quality of a teacher is taken to be dependent on any or a combination of—post-graduate qualifications, research and publications, teaching experience of more than six years. Quality at Peradeniya, in terms of post-graduate qualifications, its trends and current status can be seen in the data given below.

#### Staff With Post-Graduate Qualification

	<i>Position in 1980</i>	<i>Teachers Acquiring Higher Degrees 1980- 1986 (June)</i>	<i>New Recruits 1980- 1986 (June)</i>	<i>Left Service 1980- 1986 (June)</i>	<i>Position in June 1986</i>	<i>Available for Teaching 1986 June</i>
Ph.Ds	9	1	2	7	5	4

			(one tempo- rary)		(one tempo- rary)	(one tempo- rary)
M.As/ M.Sc.	3	3	—	3	3	2
Total Strength of Staff	10				18	

Teachers with post-graduate qualifications who accounted for two thirds of the staff in 1980 are today less than half of the staff. Six years back, half of the total staff consisted of Ph.D.s but today, they account for only one fourth. In the Tamil medium only one out of the five teachers has post-graduate qualifications. As some of the senior teachers would be away on sabbatical leave, the number of teachers with post-graduate qualifications actually available for teaching in a given year would be less than the number on the staff. Thus, at the present moment there are only six with post-graduate qualifications available for teaching.

The quality of staff has suffered a sharp decline in the last six years. Seven Ph.Ds and three MAs/M.Sc., making a total of ten with post-graduate qualifications, who were in their mid-career levels, left the service of the department. Seven of them left for greener pastures abroad attracted by remuneration several times higher than here and also by prospects for further advancement of career. No conceivable increase in salary or provision of perquisites here could have prevented their departure. All of them except one were married and enjoyed housing facilities provided by the University. The departure of the other three was to fill posts in the other universities of the country. While this exodus was taking place only four members of the staff were able to obtain post-graduate qualifications (one Ph.D. and three M. As/M.Sc.) for the whole of the six and a half years period. Recruitment from outside during this period brought in two Ph. Ds; one of them on a temporary basis. Posts of Lecturer/Senior Lecturer in Economics were advertised regularly, six in all, during this period. There was only one solitary response with the requisite post-graduate qualifications.

Engaging visiting lecturers would be a method of filling the voids at senior level staff, but unfortunately, Peradeniya is not well placed to exploit it. At the current university rates of payment for lectures, travelling etc., it is hardly worth their while for persons in Colombo to undergo the bother of travelling four hours each way to Peradeniya. Arrangements have been made with much difficulty for four visiting lecturers from Colombo for the present academic session of 1985/86. Some of them agreed out of a sense of loyalty to their old institution which is in distress and because they could not say no to a personal request from their former teacher. Most of them participate on the strict understanding that it is for the present academic session only.

What is needed in response to the situation depicted above is a staff development programme formulated in full cognizance of the facts that there is a great scarcity of economists with post-graduate qualifications in the country, that the few available have wide options here and abroad and that the drain at the senior level of the University staff will persist. This programme should provide for recruitment at the junior level each year of a sufficient number and enable them to obtain post-graduate qualifications abroad within the first four years of their service. The numbers so benefitted should be large enough to reach a target, in the medium term, of filling two thirds of the total staff with teachers having post-graduate qualifications while allowing for two kinds of wastages, namely, (1) that some of the juniors sent out will not complete their studies or not return to the staff (ii) that of those who return with qualifications, some will leave the staff after six years of service, i.e. along with their first sabbatical. In the latter case the University will have little to complain because it would have reaped the benefits of the services of teachers fresh with research and higher studies for at least six years.

(d) *Recruitment at Junior Level*—During the period 1980—1986 (June), ten recruitments were made at the probationary assistant lecturer level. During the same period five probationary assistant lecturers left the service of the University and the status of two who are now abroad is uncertain because they had proceeded overseas without complying with the necessary formalities. Among those who left the service were two new appointees who after a short period opted for employment outside at much higher salaries. One got a place

in a private firm at three times the salary of an assistant lecturer and the other joined a research project which though only for two years was at a salary paid by international organizations. Another new appointee declined to accept the offer when something much better came up in a public sector institution in Colombo. Each year the Department tries to build up its staff by recruiting to it the best products from each batch but finds it difficult to retain for long the services of these recruits. The problem at this level is not so much an inadequacy in numbers, but high turnover of those who join. Attempts at building up staff in these circumstances reminds one of the saying "Lahen gemban maninawa wageyi". By the time some have been collected and put in, others had jumped out.

One consequence of this high turnover of staff at the junior level and of the departures at the senior level is that at any time about one third of the total staff comprise temporary assistant lecturers who have to serve as stop-gaps. Some of them have little chance of being absorbed into the permanent staff, while some of the others are just marking time hoping to get into something better. Thus some of them fail to develop a commitment to teaching and make little effort to improve their proficiency. The very high turnover within the temporary segment of the staff often causing staff changes in the middle of terms dislocates the teaching programme.

Partly as a result of the high turnover of the junior staff, both permanent and temporary, it has not been possible to build up and maintain a pattern of specialisation among juniors that is in consonance with the structure of courses in economics. Of the present total of 12 assistant lecturers, both temporary and permanent in the two media, 10 have specialised in statistics. Monetary economics which by far is the most conducive to versatility in a young teacher in economics, and to a capability of handling a wide range of subject areas in economics is represented by only two assistant lecturers and both of them are in the tamil medium. Comparative economic development, an important and a useful subject is not represented at all. The only one who had specialised in that field is no more with the staff.

(e) **Post-graduate Studies of Junior Staff**—The foregoing discussion on quality of staff and especially the discussion on recruitment at junior level must logically lead to the issue of acquisition of post-graduate qualifications by the junior staff. This question is in fact at the centre of things for it holds the key to many of the problems enumerated above. Having a sufficient number of juniors in the “pipe line”, going through post-graduate studies and research, is the only way of meeting the problems of departures at the senior level, the vacancies created thereby and the resultant decline in the quality of staff. Further, if the new recruits can be provided with opportunities to pursue higher studies abroad without delay it would give the Department the power to attract the best graduates to its staff and also to retain their services at least until their first sabbatical.

In the period 1980—1986 (June), eight probationary assistant lecturers were able to proceed abroad to pursue higher studies at foreign universities. Two of them who joined Canadian Universities went on private arrangements made by them with the help of well wishers and friends in Canada. They had been trying for about four years to go out and one of them has set up a record by having sent about 50 letters and applications to various universities seeking admission and requesting financial assistance. The one that ultimately worked for him was some sort of teaching assistantship for one year. Both of them had to pay for their passage. Two others went to Thammasat University, Thailand, on scholarships offered by it. This is the only foreign University that offers scholarships and sends out its faculty members to Sri Lanka to make selections.

The remaining four were able to obtain open scholarships, viz, Colombo Plan, Fulbright and Commonwealth. It is of interest to note that three of them were successful in getting two scholarships each, Colombo Plan and Fulbright in one case, Fulbright and Commonwealth in two cases, out of which they could of course utilise only one discarding the other, This was mainly because of their proficiency in english, all being products of the english stream, and their ability to create favourable impressions at the interviews. Other assistant lecturers equally good in the subject and with research

potential but lacking in these qualities also completed but failed to get any, even the ones discarded by the others. This shows that in their distribution, the very few open scholarships available for all social sciences (cannot be more than three per year) tend to get concentrated in just one or two applicants resulting in non-utilisation, possible waste and deprivation for those who also deserve and badly need these scholarships.

Non-availability of opportunities for higher studies/training reduces much of the attractiveness of university employment as compared to others such as the Central Bank, Sri Lanka Administrative Service, and Planning Service. Also, for those who join the university, frustration sets in when they see only dim prospects for career advancement through higher studies.

Working for a local post-graduate degree is not an attractive proposition for a young assistant lecturer because he cannot hope to benefit from any course work which he would need and desire. Facilities for such course work are not available. They also cannot hope to receive much guidance and supervision in the research component as there is a shortage of senior teachers who could render such assistance. In fact never in the history of the Department of Economics, Peradeniya, has a teacher, junior or senior, past or present, worked for and acquired a local post-graduate degree in Economics.\* A facility that has been exploited by the junior staff is the M.Sc/M.Phil programmes in agriculture (Agricultural Economics) at the Postgraduate Institute of Agriculture. Due to the fact that the Professor of Econ/Head Economics is the elected Chairman of the Board of Studies in Agricultural Economics, a scheme by which assistant lecturers in economics could join these programmes, on a part time basis (involving no leave) and on the basis of course units prescribed by the Professor of Economics, has been arranged and has worked well. In 1980-1986 (June) seven assistant lecturers, permanent and temporary, have completed or are still participating in these programmes. It has benefitted them

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\* There was one case very recently, but that was by way of completing work that had been carried out at a foreign university.

in many ways—(i) kept them busy reading, researching and writing; if not for these programmes they would have been idling and lolling around (ii) improved their knowledge in the subject, benefitting their teaching and their research capabilities, the qualifications attained will improve their chances in obtaining foreign scholarships and admission to foreign universities, and the experience gained will go a long way with their future studies in foreign universities (iii) has given them an opportunity for the first time to study and to work in English.

Participation in the above programme is largely in the nature of a temporary expedient or one that is preparatory to higher studies abroad. As mentioned before, a scheme is necessary whereby at least two assistant lecturers are sent out every year in four batches for higher studies abroad with a target of having two thirds of the staff possessing post-graduate qualifications by the end of an eight year period. The number sent out each year should be on such a scale as to allow for possible wastage due to non-completion of degrees or vacation of posts. An indication of the wastage involved is that out of the nine assistant lecturers who were out on overseas study leave in 1980—1986, four have resigned or have vacated their posts and the present status of two others is uncertain.

In working out a scheme, the Department of Economics by itself can achieve very little. Possibilities were explored by the department in 1980—1986 of twinning or partnership arrangements with foreign universities for staff development, curriculum improvement and joint research. Two Canadian Universities, McGill and Simon Fraser and the University of Boston in U.S.A., responded avidly and were fully appreciative of the mutual benefits that could accrue from such arrangement. Simon Fraser University, urged by our former colleague and friend Prof. A. J. Wilson of New Brunswick (who acted as the go-between) went so far as to apply to a funding agency for support but unfortunately drew a blank. The University of Peradeniya must take a hand in this with the UGC to work out a scheme. It is necessary for the Head/Economics, Dean of Arts and the Vice-Chancellor to work as a team to arrange a scheme with the assistance and through the good offices of the UGC and other relevant government agencies.

## 2. Students, Their Quality and Application to Studies

It has been said that in the last one or two decades the tendency in the schools has been for the best students to go into the science stream, the next best into commerce, and the remainder into the arts stream. Be that as it may, there are other things to note about the student of economics at Peradeniya.

(a) **School Background**—More than 80 per cent of the students in special economics in the Sinhala medium are from the districts in and around the Central hills—Kandy, Matale, Kegalle, Kurunegala, Ratnapura, Nuwara Eliya and Badulla. Two thirds are from Kandy district itself. Thus it is a regional student population that is being catered to. Their school backgrounds are from the districts which are less developed educationally as compared to those of the Western and Southern provinces. In the tamil medium, nearly all are from Batticaloa, Trincomalee, Ampara, Badulla and Nuwara Eliya districts and hardly any from Jaffna. This trend towards regional concentration has arisen after the shift of a part of the Arts Faculty to Dumbara and the denial of residential facilities to arts students in their GAQ and SAQ first years. Many a student from the South and the West has been put off from seeking admission to Peradeniya on account of the non-availability of residential facilities. Why deny these facilities to arts students only? Every step must be taken to admit more students from the educationally more advanced districts. A measure that can be immediately adopted is to have some places at the SAQ level for open admission from among students who had completed their GAQ at other universities. In these ways the present rather unhealthy uniformity could be broken and replaced by students with more varied school backgrounds, horizons and outlooks of mind which would allow for greater competition, learning from association etc.

(b) **Knowledge of Mathematics**—The standard of mathematics knowledge that the students have brought with them from their schools is low. At the University they are taught mathematics in their GAQ and SAQ years. What is noticeable is a pattern of polarisation of mathematics knowledge among the students. At their GAQ and SAQ performances about 8 per cent of the students in the Sinhala medium obtain A grades. They are obviously the students who have an aptitude for mathematics and have been exposed to some good teaching of mathematics while in school. The remainder of over 70 per cent obtain C grades or just manage to scrape through. The failure rate in mathematics is about 8—10 per cent.



(c) **Knowledge of English**—This is extremely low among the students studying economics at general as well as special levels in both Sinhala and Tamil media. Here again a polarisation is evident. At their GAQ and SAQ examinations about 5 per cent of the students in the Sinhala medium obtain A grades. For the rest it is just scraping through with C grades and failure for about 10 per cent. Earlier, the students did not much appreciate the need to study English and attendance in English classes was irregular among both Sinhala and Tamil media students. Every year action had to be taken against quite a number of students who kept off altogether from attending and there are much less complaints now of non-attendance by economics students. It is generally believed that students in both media are now beginning to appreciate the usefulness of English and are quite keen on availing themselves of the opportunities.

(d) **Language Ability**—The most alarming thing, however, is the decline in ability in Sinhala and Tamil languages. In Sinhala, as compared with the sixties, there has been a very noticeable deterioration in grammar, composition, spelling and an equally noticeable narrowing down in vocabulary. The spoken language has also deteriorated and an ugly and a most damaging tendency has set in to mix English words or those that sound like English when speaking in Sinhala. Language ability is weak for about two thirds of the students in the Sinhala medium. A similar pattern has been observed for the Tamil medium. Along with this there has also been a marked deterioration in the quality of handwriting. Going on answer scripts for the special degree, legibility is limited to about 30%; for 40%; there are various shades of legibility or illegibility calling for some effort on the part of the examiners. Hand writing is illegible with about 25%. The picture, however, is slightly better with tutorials. The marked deterioration in the standard of spoken and written language has been a major contributory factor to the lowering of quality of students in the last decade or two. This most unhealthy trend has caused much concern among senior teachers. A scheme for correcting this situation is needed. Students should be graded on admission on their language ability. Language correction and improvement classes should then be conducted for those who are weak during the GAQ year, with two hours per week in the first two terms, to be followed up for those who still have not improved, with one hour per week at the SAQ year, for the first two terms.

(e) **Attendance and Application of Students**—Attendance of students in the sinhala medium at all levels falls noticeably towards the end and beginning of a week and even much more noticeably for several days at a stretch when there are intervening public holidays. The first four months of the year (and also of the academic session of the arts faculty), are the worst affected by such absenteeism since these months are characterised by a heavy incidence of such public holidays. In special economics, sinhala medium, attendance could on such occasions drop by 33%—50%. Teaching programmes, especially tutorials which are conducted according to schedule, get disrupted. Absenteeism on this scale is a relatively recent phenomenon and can be attributed to the combined effect of several developments. (i) the shifting of a part of the arts faculty to Dumbara and the denial of residential facilities to a section of the arts students (ii) withdrawal of supply of meals by halls of residence and the students having to purchase their meals from caterers or prepare their meals by themselves. (iii) the fact that the great majority of students are from places in the surrounding districts which involve only one or two hours of travelling. In these circumstances many students find it convenient and also economical to stay with their families as often or as long as possible. The solution to this is to restore residential facilities to all arts faculty students and to have a less pronounced district—wise distribution of students. Also the wisdom of observing all public holidays for the students in a residential university needs to be re-examined. We have evidently come a long way from the days of Sir Ivor Jennings when it was possible to debate whether February 4th should be observed or not as a non-working day at Peradeniya Campus. An argument then was that the idea and purpose of a residential university would be defeated if normal work, academic and non-academic, were to stop on certain days during session. Why not, it was argued, celebrate Independence for one hour early in the morning and then get back to normal day's work.

(f) **Dissertations**—This is a bright spot in the programme of teaching economics at Peradeniya. The students generally show themselves at their best in dissertations which result from their own efforts under some guidance from the teachers. Many of them are based on

mini field surveys/studies, in which they use the methods of collecting, analysing and presenting data and information that they had learned in class. They also make some effort to build up the necessary background knowledge and perspectives by doing the requisite reference. Thus some of these dissertations are in the nature of contributions to knowledge at least in respect of the data and information unearthed. About a quarter of the dissertations in the Sinhala medium deserve A grades and are very good, while another quarter or so deserve B grades and are good. An arrangement is necessary to have selected ones edited and published in order to disseminate the knowledge and to encourage the students. Funds are necessary to cover (i) any financial assistance that the authors may need to further improve their works (ii) the printing or reproducing expense (iii) fees payable for editing to be done by senior members of the staff and outside experts.

### 3. Structure of Courses and Their Contents

The structure of courses has remained virtually the same since the major overhaul in the late 1970s which introduced the scheme of ten papers, inclusive of two in the optional subject, plus dissertation, for the special degree. Additions have been made within this framework and the manner of so doing has been the introduction of new courses by teachers on their return from post-graduate studies and in the fields they had specialised in. Thus the second half of the 1970s witnessed the introduction of the special subjects of transport economics, labour economics and agricultural economics, along with the return of several staff members who had been enabled to go abroad in the early 1970s. If that was a period of expansion then the 1980s up to date have proved to be one of contraction. During this period only a few went out for post-graduate studies hardly any one returned with any clear cut specialisation and many senior teachers left the department. In these circumstances not only was it impossible to introduce any new and desirable courses such as mathematical economics, it was also not possible to continue with some of the existing ones. Thus there was no alternative but to withdraw or suspend several special courses, viz., transport economics, labour economics and comparative economic development. Of these, transport economics was due to be scrapped in any case because it suffered from certain initial weaknesses which it could never overcome.

Certain developments among students have also contributed to this tendency towards a contraction. It is seen that the students who have some aptitude for mathematics or who feel confident about it often specialise in Statistics in their final year in the hope of being able to score high by getting their formulae and sums correct while many of the others who are diffident about their mathematics opt for agricultural economics which in their eyes is a soft option. With this polarisation there is just a few for monetary economics and hardly anyone for comparative economic development, the subjects which many students try to avoid because of their inability to do the necessary reading in English. It is mainly due to this reason that these two subjects are not represented among the assistant lecturers in the Sinhala medium and that all of them represent statistics.

Revisions and modernisation of the contents of individual courses were possible in the 1970s when the overseas returnees introduced new topics or began handling old ones in new ways in the light of knowledge acquired through their researches and the exposure to curricula in advanced country universities. This source of modernisation has now dried up.

There have, however, been occasional revisions to courses resulting from reviews and discussions among staff. Thus a surprise test carried out for GAQ students revealed that while they could mechanically repeat things about curves and angles etc. they did not quite understand the concepts, their usefulness and their tool value or for that matter what the nature and scope of the subject of economics is. Hence, it was decided to devote some time to teaching about economics, its nature scope and the problems.

There are two possible sources from which ideas could emanate for the improvement of syllabi, but both these do not function any more. One source comprise external examiners who could offer comments after each examination. The use of persons outside the University as moderators and second marking examiners is limited to the few papers for which suitable outside persons can be found. Some scripts in the Tamil medium are sent to Jaffna University for second marking. For the most part, the moderation and second marking is done internally. There is little inducement for any external examiner to write up learned comments on courses, syllabi and student performances on the pay of Rs. 1.50 per script. It is proposed that a separate fee, and a handsome one, be payable to external examiners for the submission of reports. The other source of ideas would be the sabbatical leave of senior teachers spent in overseas universities. The original purpose of the sabbatical leave facility was precisely this; an opportunity for academic rejuvenation.

At present the sabbatical leave is mostly spent on the particular research projects for which the awards have been made or in non-teaching type employment. There has to be a scheme for enabling senior teachers to periodically visit reputed universities on study and observation tours. At present, the Department of Economics, Peradeniya, has no connection whatsoever with any advanced country university on the basis of exchange visits, examination work or research.

#### 4. Library Facilities

Ample library facilities are available in the Central Library as well as in the various branch and specialist libraries in Peradeniya and Dumbara. There is some problem of a maldistribution of material as between Peradeniya and Dumbara with the latter having far more than what it needs now. For this problem there are so many easy solutions. The problem which is real and for which there is no short term solution is that only very little use is made of these facilities. Hardly any economics students visit the ground floor reading room of the Central Library for the sake of the books of general interest, year books and encyclopaedias kept there. They visit the Current Periodicals Room not for any of the numerous journals in social sciences displayed there but mostly to read the *Arthika Vimasuma* and its tamil version and to consult the Annual Report of the Central Bank to obtain whatever data they need. The First Floor Reading Room is patronised for the sake of the books on economics in sinhala and the hundreds of volumes in the English. Room are patronised for the sake of the books on economics in Sinhala and the hundreds of volumes in English are hardly touched. Some economics students do sit in the Ceylon Room doing references and collecting material around the time they have to write up their dissertations.

#### 5. Life and Activity in the Halls of Residence

In considering this factor in the teaching-learning of economics at Peradeniya, one's mind goes back nostalgically to the days of institutions such as Union Hostel, Colombo, and Arunachalam Hall, Peradeniya of 1952—1954. A good part of university life then pivoted around hostels/halls. A hostel/hall contained a community, on the basis of commensality and common activities organised by hostel/hall societies. There were talks by guest speakers at dinners. For example, the talk given by the late D. B. Ellepola on the Kandyan Peasantry (when the K. P. C. was sitting) at the Union Hostel, Colombo, and the one made by Prof. G. P. Malalasekara on the "Contemporary American Scene" at 'A' Hall, Peradeniya in 1953, are still ringing in the ears of the present writer. Prof. Malalasekara's incisive treatment and the vivid discription of the role and impact of commercial

advertising in American society provided such insights that could not have been gained from any class room lectures or from days of library study. There were also the debates organised by these societies. Even the free wheeling conversations in the hostel/hall common rooms could rise to levels of sophistication and rigour.

Against such a past and a background the present condition at Peradeniya is a pitiable one. Although it possesses the necessary physical infrastructure of educational pursuits in a residential setting it does not fully exploit the institutional potentialities of this setting for the academic advancement of the residents. The spirit of residential education is extinct. For one thing, a section of the arts students is denied residential facilities. For those in residence there is no commensality in the halls. For them the hall is a place for eating, bedding and toilet facilities. There are hardly any organised hall activities, academic or extra curricular. In the evenings many of the students are procuring dry rations and cooking their meals. The common rooms are in a state of neglect, dust laden, with no furniture, magazines or news papers. The halls have ceased to play their expected role in promoting in the periphery the academic activities of the students. One contributory step towards solving the several problems of teaching and learning economics at Peradeniya, is a return to residential facilities to all, discriminating against none, and a revival of the "hall system".

# THE PRESENT STANDARDS OF ECONOMICS EDUCATION IN THE UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA

*by*

H. N. S. KARUNATILAKE

Economics education in the universities in Sri Lanka commenced in the thirties and in the initial stage, economics was not taught as a separate subject for the courses conducted for undergraduates. The curriculum in economics at the University of Ceylon consisted of one or two main subjects as such as Economics, Money and Banking, Political Science and Economic History. These courses were being taught at a time when economics as a subject had not diversified into the large number of subject areas which now constitute the subject of economics. In the 1920s and 1930s, even in the universities in the West, the main subject areas in economics, were limited. It mainly included Principles of Economics, Money and Banking, International Trade, Statistics and Labour Economics. In the 1920s and 1930s the number of books on economics was very few and consisted mostly of basic text books and some pioneering studies by the greatest names in economics. There were no general and specialised studies such as those that have appeared in the last forty years and which today tend to supplement the basic textbooks on the subject.

In the 1940s the University of Sri Lanka prepared undergraduate students for the examinations of the University of London. After 1942, the University held its own examinations. Economics became an increasingly popular subject and students who were offering the subject began to specialise in Money and Banking, Political Theory, Economic History and Statistics. Upto the late 1950s teaching was undertaken in English and the majority of economics teachers had first or higher degrees from universities in the West. Upto the 1960s, examination papers in economics were moderated by external examiners, who usually came from the leading universities in the United Kingdom, particularly the University of London.

Several factors which have contributed to the maintenance of standards in economics education upto 1960 could be identified. Firstly, the courses were conducted in English and both students and teachers had access to the vast body of new literature on economics and the new subject areas it spawned, which started coming out in the post war period. Books on economics were cheap and students could afford to buy basic texts. The diversification of the subject areas of economics in this period resulted mainly from policy and structural changes which took place in the world economy after the Second World War. The problem of poverty and development and the collection of a wide range of social and economic data figured in a large way in the identification of new subject areas in the general field of economics. For the first time, increasing interest was directed to the development, extension and application of existing and new theories. For instance there were the post war monetary and trade problems and the question of development and of finding adequate resources for the development of poor countries of the world. All these new areas of interest contributed to the sophistication of the theoretical content of economics, with an increasingly quantitative and analytical approach emerging. This was in contrast to the earlier approach which was less analytical and quantitative. John Maynard Keynes revolutionised economic thinking and analysis, his work fundamentally influenced several branches of the subject and paved the way for the emergence of new subject areas.

Another factor which has contributed to maintain standards in economics education was the fact that the teachers had either higher degrees from universities abroad or were conversant with the most recent development in the various branches of economics. Their ability to work in English enabled them to read widely on the subject and to provide upto date and stimulating lectures to students. Students were encouraged to read, and reading formed the basis of in depth discussions in the lectures and tutorial classes. Furthermore, before the sixties, the volume of new literature on economics was less than in the period between 1960 and 1985 which produced a plethora of new texts and general writing. After the fifties the basic subject areas in economics like Micro and Macro theory, Monetary theory, International Trade and Economic Development became more quantitative and mathematical. The average student and teacher in Sri Lanka who had not done enough higher mathematics thus found it difficult to read the texts. At the same time the universities were not equipped to provide them with a mathematical background to build up the understanding of modern economics. Effective steps were not taken to provide students with an adequate knowledge of English



In Sri Lanka it is unfortunate that both the quality of teaching and the equipment of the average teacher has tended to decline in the sixties and thereafter when economics became more sophisticated with a higher quantitative and analytical content. Especially, the courses that were taught in the universities here tended to lag far behind those in the average university in the U.K., U.S.A. or Australia, from where most of the university teachers would normally receive higher degrees. In the earlier period, teachers in Sri Lanka were conscious of the need to maintain and achieve high standards which were required by external examiners and in this regard the students themselves made a considerable effort. Whatever deficiencies there were in the lectures, were made up by wide reading and the libraries were well equipped with the most recent texts. The ratio of teachers to students was also more favourable, and relatively few assistant lecturers took any lectures; other than in the first year; they were assigned mostly to tutorial classes.

The standard of economics education must be maintained at the highest possible level because the country needs good economists, researchers and planners who could play a key role in administration, economic management and policy formulation. Competent and highly qualified economists should be in a position to analyse current problems and work out self reliant, economic policies. The decline in the quality of graduates in economics is mainly responsible for the present lacunae in this area. The volume of writing and analysis on economic subjects have declined to a mere trickle, while theoretical and analytical studies are totally absent. This is despite the fact that over the last 20 years Sri Lanka has produced thousands of economics graduates and many of them have specialised in the different subject areas of economics. If the standards of economics education was high there would have been a large volume of writing and research. Most of the economists in Sri Lanka who continue to write and to do research belong to the older generation of economists, meaning those who graduated before the sixties.

Teachers in economics themselves have not been able to see or identify the fall in standards in economics education. Although this problem has come to light when university teachers go abroad for higher degrees, or when graduates go before interview boards.

What are the yardsticks by which the quality of courses could be measured? What are the main indicators of a fall in standards? How do we determine this? For instance what are the means of determining the ability and quality of an university economics teacher? The measures are hard to define fairly meaningfully. Many do not agree with the need for standards and

some maintain that standards have not fallen. Firstly, there is his academic equipment, formal and otherwise, and his analytical capacities which are reflected in research and writing. Secondly, exposure that teachers have had to more recent writing not merely in his areas of specialisation but in the field of economics in general. Thirdly, teachers must stimulate thought and develop theories in the areas of research that they undertake.

It might be useful to look at these three aspects in more detail. The bulk of the staff in the Economics Departments are all fairly junior academics. Most of them have not been given opportunities of studying at universities overseas and they have not had opportunities of undertaking research under suitable direction and guidance. Presumably they are preoccupied with their teaching, preparation of lectures and examination work. They may also be moving around in academic groups which consist of persons with the same level of academic attainment and on account of this they have no way of academically advancing themselves by discussion and exchange of ideas on the economics subjects they teach. In universities abroad the senior lecturers have a major impact on their juniors through discussions and exchange of ideas. Papers written by seniors are given to the juniors or even to the students for comments and vice versa. This is rarely found in our universities. The senior academics would prefer to discuss issues in English.

Other than a few articles to the newspapers in Sinhala there is very little research and writing by the university teachers. Most of them write on current topics and reading through them one can gauge their analytical capacities. The equipment and their knowledge of the subject can also be ascertained when assistant lecturers, temporary or permanent, are interviewed for jobs. Avenues for graduates in economics have been there for a long time at the Central Bank, the commercial banks, the Agrarian Research and Training Institute. Ministeries of Finance, Planning, Trade etc. I am only describing the conclusions I have arrived at by sitting on these boards since 1965. The knowledge of the better graduate, since only those with first and second class uppers are eligible to be recruited, is a reflection of the standards of economics in the universities. These can be summarised as follows.

1. At these interviews questions are asked on theory and on applied aspects of the subject. When it comes to Micro and Macro theory most candidates have admitted that they have read only one of the simple basic texts on the subjects. Many have read only the lecture

notes because their knowledge of English has been poor. You will agree that no single text can give a graduate or an university lecturer an adequate and detailed knowledge of the subject. On each topic the lectures must be supplemented with additional reading of books and articles.

2. In the case of those who have depended on the lecture notes it is found that the lectures are out of date and have not covered the most recent developments in the subject area. This is particularly true of Micro theory, Macro theory, Monetary theory and Statistics which is the hard core of economics and provides every economist with the basic tools of analysis.
3. I have seen the reading lists of several universities and I am unable to comment on them in detail. Several of them do not include more recent texts and articles. By more recent I mean literature that has appeared in the sixties and seventies. Some of the reading lists are better formulated but it is doubtful whether students could read and assimilate and make use of the material. Because often this involves a good knowledge of english and mathematics.
4. Theories and subject material have been studied through lecture notes and limited reading, and the candidate is unable to apply his knowledge to practical problems. This reflects a lack of analytical ability.
5. Most candidates are interested in furthering their knowledge of the subject, but are unable to do so because all the texts are in english. To read fairly advanced texts in economics a good knowledge of english is essential.

In regard to the second aspect, the problem of standards is linked up with the means of updating knowledge and the ability to read widely. Upto date knowledge is the outcome mainly of wide reading. Since the bulk of junior lecturers have had no exposure to modern curricula in economics they are unable to make a contribution to raise standards. They are also handicapped because they are unable to read theoretical and analytical work in their own areas of specialisation in economics and other subject areas. Teachers would be in a position to up-grade course content and teaching if they have themselves followed similar courses in good universities abroad, or if they are able to obtain reading lists and reading material that are available from universities overseas.

From what I have gathered from students, tutorial classes have turned out to be forums for the narrow discussions of a given topic. The compass of the analysis and discussion is limited by the capacity of the tutor who is only able to confine explanations to the narrowest limits of the subject area. Normally he is unable to make an extended discussion of the topic so as to stimulate further interest in the students. In view of this, particularly the junior teachers are unable to stimulate the students to look at economic issues independently and to create a situation where the students himself is in a position to formulate and present his thoughts critically on the issue.

The standards are also dependent on the contribution of the student. Firstly, the student must have an interest in obtaining an up to date knowledge of the subject and not limit the ultimate aim in university education to pass an examination and obtain a degree. He must have a genuine interest in the subject and must endeavour to gather as much knowledge as possible. One is unable to say what percentage of the economics students fall into this category with higher aspirations. The ability of students to read in english rapidly and also assimilate the subject matter with relative ease is equally important. He should also have the ability to answer questions to the point and have adequate factual and analytical material for a satisfactory answer; the latter is a function of his reading ability.

One of the methods of directly making an assesment of the standards of economics education is a survey of the content and coverage of the courses and standards of the question papers and the quality of the answers to the questions. The University Grants Commission in collaboration with the Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences is presently undertaking a survey of standards in economics education in the different universities in Sri Lanka. Accordingly it has issued a questionnaire to all universities. From a preview of the replies received it is possible to obtain some indication of the standards of economics education in the country. This survey will only give a partial indication of the standards. Information will be available on the qualifications and work load of university teachers, details will be available on the syllabuses for each subject area and the frequency with which they have been updated in the past. The past question papers in economics have been made available and these papers will give an indication of the coverage of the syllabus, the standard of examination and the extent to which the syllabus and teaching is upto date. However, the survey will not highlight several other criteria which are all indispensable in the evaluation of standards in economics education. These are briefly (1) The content,

coverage and the analytical aspects of lectures delivered (2) The quality and equipment of lecturers (3) The extent to which prescribed syllabuses have been covered (4) Reading undertaken by students on the subjects, and whether students are interested in supplementary reading (5) The standards applied by internal and external examiners in the assessment of papers (6) The student's knowledge of english and mathematics.

A very preliminary review of the answers to the questionnaires issued by the Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences gives some index of why it has been difficult to maintain standards. In the Department of Economics in Colombo there are 478 students in the first year with seven teachers giving one teacher for every 68 students. In the general degree course there are 186 students in the 2nd year, with 5 teachers, and the resulting student teacher ratio is 33. In the special degree, the student teacher ratios are better, with 32 students with 6 teachers in the 2nd year, in the 3rd year 21 students with seven teachers, and in the fourth year 35 students with seven teachers. In the Post-graduate Diploma Course in Economic Development there were 55 students with 17 lecturers.

In regard to the undergraduate teaching staff at Colombo, of 18 lecturers nine have postgraduate degrees of whom 2 are visiting lecturers. Two permanent members of the staff have Phd's, while one visiting lecturer falls into the same category. Of the permanent junior staff members, three have only first degrees, two temporary assistant lecturers have diplomas. Three assistant lecturers who have no higher degrees, and of whom two are temporary, take special degree classes in the second and third years. Looking at the entire staff, five teachers without higher degrees both permanent and visiting, take special degree classes from the first to the third year. The Diploma in Economic Development is dependent largely on 13 qualified visiting lecturers. The question is why arent the services of the qualified visiting staff not used for undergraduate teaching.

In the special degree second year, key subjects like Micro-economics, Macro-economics and Mathematical Economics are taught by junior lecturers without higher degrees. Third year special Development Economics is taught by a temporary assistant lecturer. While the Evolution of Economic Thought is taught by a visiting lecturer with a first degree. In the third year, the special subject Economics of Planning is taught by an assistant lecturer and Monetary Economics II and Economics by visiting lecturers who hold first degrees. The assistant lecturers carry a fair amount of the teaching load; one does 36 hours per week, another 34 hours, and two others 36 and 29 hours.

Although copies of the syllabuses in each subject for general and special degree courses have been made available no reading lists or prescribed texts have been included. The standard of the question papers shows considerable variation. For the special students, especially in subjects like Micro and Macro theory and Monetary theory, papers have been set where candidates have been required to select the correct answer out of four or five answers given. This does not seem to be a particularly satisfactory procedure because the candidates' analytical, writing and presentation abilities do not figure. Some syllabuses have not been systematically formulated and the coverage does not include more recent developments in the subject area. In papers such as Applied Economics, Money and Banking and Public Finance there is too much emphasis on Sri Lanka and many of the answers required are descriptive rather than analytical. I have confined these general observations to the teaching of economics in the University of Colombo. There is hardly any time available to even briefly mention a few aspects of the teaching of economics at Sri Jayawardenapura, Kelaniya and Jaffna, the other universities that have replied to the questionnaire.

#### **Dr. Karunatilake**

Actually no one has made an assesment of the quality of graduates. I have been on recruitment boards for a long time. I can see some of the people whom I recruited also present here. I think I have been a fairly unpopular member of these boards. I can make a meaningful assesment of ability and quality because in particular. I have been on the interview boards of Central Bank from 1965, the ARTI, the Universities, NARESA, National Development Bank and many others for a long time. I am going to make some frank remarks and I am making them in good faith.

The recruits that come before us all have second class upper degrees or first class degrees. We don't normally interview second class lowers. And we have been putting questions to them under two broad categories. This is particularly applicable to those who come to the Central Bank. Firstly we put questions to them on reading and theoretical knowledge. Then we get on to the practical side and we ask questions about Asian economies the Sri Lanka economy, or a comparative assesment of economies in South East Asia. What we discovered was that with a few exceptions, in both theory and practical knowledge, the present graduates were defficient, When they came for the interviews unfortunately many of them also held positions out side and were not unemployed. Most of them were lecturers or were working in the Peoples Bank or in the Bank of Ceylon, or in private research institutions. The common feature was that most of them had read only the

notes. The reading knowledge of basic texts was poor. Normally the discussion starts with Macro and Micro theory and then we go on to Statistics. The statistical exercise was often done on a blackboard. Normally those who had read widely were those who could speak English. As a matter of policy we did not question a Sinhala or Tamil speaking candidate in English. Even the Tamil speaking candidates were interviewed through an interpreter. But the Sinhala candidates were never questioned in English. As the Chairman of the Board I very often conducted the entire interview in Sinhala, despite the fact that some of my colleagues on the Board never understood the questions.

It was a fair exercise, but the deficiencies were very clear. Their knowledge of texts was very poor, in fact when you ask them whether they had read particular books they said they have never heard of them. Their standard reply was we were expected to read only certain selected sections on specific topics. My conclusion is that the undergraduate material is excellent. Some candidates who came for the interview went abroad and did well. What I went to emphasise is that the material we have in Sri Lanka is excellent, compared to students in other Asian countries. But they have not had the right exposure and access to good teachers. The graduates who were recruited to the Central Bank and who went for higher studies abroad have fared exceptionally well.

## DISCUSSION

Dr. K Dharmasena

In 1983 I conducted a survey on the teaching of economics in the Universities of Sri Lanka for the UNESCO according to which in all the Universities the teacher-pupil ratio is around 1: 60. Because of this very high ratio it had become increasingly difficult to follow the discussion method which is considered the ideal way of teaching the subject. Then there is the language difficulty. The majority of students are weak in English and hence there is an over dependency on the lecturer, apart from that, there is the paucity of economic literature in the national languages. Although the switch over to the national languages in the teaching of the subject had been done as far back as in 1960 the number of texts on the subject written in Sinhala or Tamil is very few. To my knowledge the number of texts written in Sinhala is not more than four. Economic theory is not the only subject that comes within the discipline of economics. For subjects like economics history and applied economics there is hardly any text written in the Sinhala language.

There is however, a possibility of increasing the economic literature in the national languages. On the other issue raised by Prof. Hewavitharana, I would like to say that there is not only an expansion of the subject matter but also a proliferation of subjects within the discipline of economics which has made the problem of teaching the subject more difficult in the national languages. Prof. Hewavitharana and Dr. Karunatilake also made references to the falling standards but we cannot generalise on that since there are inter-institutional disparities. There can be some universities where the standard can be somewhat high and there can be others of which the standard could be lower. To some extent the inter-institutional disparities were a result of the rationalisation scheme of 1972 some universities (Kelaniya for example) were not centres of excellence for economics. This prevented the improvement of the staff position besides making plans for the expansion of specialised courses in the discipline. Vidyalkara Campus, for example, had to seek permission from the Senate House annually to start special courses in economics during the period of the operation of the 1972 University Act. Sri Jayewardenepura University was fortunate in that respect as it was unaffected by the rationalisation scheme and according to my survey the Department of Economics of that University was able to train its staff and by the early eighties it had comparatively a better qualified staff.

The staff position of Peradeniya had worse by the early eighties primarily because of the erosion of staff at the senior level. Being the mother university the new universities looked to Peradeniya in the recruitment of senior hands for their Departments of Economics. However, the retention of staff at all levels had become a common problem for the universities due to the poor salaries that all categories of university lecturers get in comparison with similar categories of employees in Corporations, Banks etc. Besides, the benefits that university lecturers received such as sabbatical and study leave abroad at university expense and housing were all lost after 1970. We must also compare the staff positions of economics departments with those of other academic departments in universities such as pali, buddhist studies and history. If you take these departments into account you will see the disparities that exist in respect of qualified lecturers as well as of the teacher-pupil ratios. In 1982 only 36 per cent of all teachers of economics in the universities had post-graduate training compared with more than 70



per cent of those in the other departments. Consequently, they carry a heavy load of work but get a salaries equal to those who are virtually under-employed. The heavy work load and the dearth of qualified teachers to handle certain subjects have adversely affected the quality of teaching and curriculum development.

In a sense it is of no benefit to update the curriculum if there are no competent academics to handle the subjects. Hence curriculum development in relation to qualified teachers is a matter to be given serious consideration if we are to improve teaching and academic standards. In this respect it is worth while if we address our minds to the feasibility of setting up a centre for the purpose under the auspices of the UGC so that the best talent could be drawn from the universities. I would also suggest that we should explore the possibility of setting up a separate institute for the teaching of Economics at the post-graduate level like the ones that are being established in Delhi and Bombay.

Mrs. S. Sirikanathan

The participants before me have brought out the important issues in detail. However, I wish to state one or two matters in the interest of both students as well as staff. The students in particular have in the past demonstrated very little interest in the use of library facilities in general. As a result they did not fully avail themselves of the opportunities to improve their independent knowledge. Hence, I suggest an orientation programme for the new students within the first few weeks of the beginning of the academic year. This type of familiarising methods are followed in the foreign universities as well.

The second important matter pertains to the dependence of our Department on mainly visiting and temporary staff. If sufficient permanent staff are available then better results can be obtained. The students have difficulty in meeting the visiting staff when they need assistance. The very few permanent staff also have problems in carrying out the work, when there aren't sufficient staff to work. The Department of Economics of the Colombo University, in particular, has suffered without permanent senior staff. In the past the Department of Economics introduced and experimented new courses like public Finance and taxation and development studies. This resulted in problems to both students as well as to the existing staff who had to bear all the work load.

Finally, in my view the Economics Department is in need of some form of foreign collaboration to build up its work. In the arts faculty, the geography and Sociology Departments have equipped themselves better as a result of links with foreign universities. This will benefit the staff directly, and help the training facilities which will eventually benefit the students.

## SRI LANKA'S ECONOMICS GRADUATES IN RELATION TO JOB OPPORTUNITIES

by

BERTRAM BASTIAMPILLAI,  
(*University of Colombo*)

In the universities of Sri Lanka, the students in the Faculties of Arts or Social Sciences and Humanities choose economics more often than not as one of their subjects of study. The largest number of students specialising in any one subject after the first year in a university will be students offering economics. Similarly, when we take into account the figures of students appearing for the Arts degrees of the different universities the largest number of students offering a single subject, in their combination of three subjects, will be those who do economics for their B.A.

In the special degrees, conducted by the universities clearly the largest number of students enroll to read for a special degree in economics and in fact the number that want to do economics as a special degree is so large that it is necessary in some years and in some universities to make the condition of admission to the Special degree courses in economics stricter than admission to special degree courses in other disciplines. Evidently, numerically, the largest number of students in the arts, social sciences and humanities streams read economics as a discipline and also draw in the better quality students: those who have performed well and achieved higher grades at their first examination get admitted to read economics as a special degree. The competition to do economics as a subject eliminates weaker students and assures a good quality intake for the special degree course in economics.

This interest in students to read economics in the universities is something not new. From about the mid 1950's onwards, clearly it became obvious to teachers in the universities that more and more students were opting to do economics and also teachers in secondary schools preparing students for the earlier University Entrance Examination and the later G.C.E. (A.L) examination came to realise soon that the one single subject which was most popular among students offering arts or social science or humanities happened

to be economics. This was so pronounced that one has come across in the University combinations such as economics geography and history being chosen by students and also rather odd and unorthodox combinations of subjects such as economics, buddhist civilization and sinhalese, or economics hindu civilization and tamil. The one undeniable fact was that economics had become and is the most popular subject at the advanced level classes and later in the universities.

In recent times with the creation of two distinct streams of disciplines such as the arts stream or social studies stream and the commerce and management stream still the largest number of students offer economics, and economics is a subject commonly available for students in both streams.

This immense popularity of economics as a discipline is not purely because of the intrinsic merits of this subjects alone. I am inclined to believe that economics grew to be more popular because of its value in relation to employment opportunities in Sri Lanka and even abroad. The A.L. students and under-graduates in schools, commonly responding to any oral inquiry as to why they choose economics, state that it is because the chances of getting jobs are better. It is again this rather pragmatic reason that it is materially valuable that has made the special degree in economics to draw in a large number of students. Incidentally this trend to opt for economics has affected adversely some of the other subjects in the arts, social sciences, and humanities, particularly history which has thereby lost popularity. Candidates, who may do history otherwise, had moved to do economics finding it a more profitable and useful choice.

Since economics is the most popular discipline, both in schools and in the universities, naturally the largest number of teachers required will be in economics. This makes it necessary for schools to look for teachers with economics as either their specialisation or as one of their degree subjects. Therefore, graduates in economics have an assured demand both in schools as teachers and in universities as lecturing and research staff. Moreover, there are also a fair number of students who prepare for the examinations of the University of London hoping either to make that qualification a terminal one or a pre-qualification for entering into a foreign university or into some other course of study. Here again there is an opportunity for those who have competence in economics to be employed either as tutors or teachers personally or in private educational establishments. Hence the largest single employing agency of graduates in economics may be considered to be schools, tutories and the higher educational institutions.

In considering this demand arising for teachers, we have also to take into account that economics is taught as a part of other courses, such as advanced diplomas in book-keeping, banking, administration, and courses in economics is also followed in regard to secretarial, management or commerce qualifications. People who have qualified in economics are, therefore, employed in the teaching required to be done in these type of courses, and thus there is yet another opportunity for graduates in economics to take to teaching jobs.

Apart from teaching, banking is another field that offers large and excellent opportunities for absorbing graduates who are competent in economics. Banks both local and foreign ones, have their officer level cadres, and generally graduates in economics should be able to fill vacancies appropriately in these cadres. Moreover, in Sri Lanka, we find the Central Bank as seen in their advertisements, looks largely but not exclusively for graduates in economics to fill their staff level vacancies. Additionally, there are research units in other banks, such as in the People's Bank, which again offer room for absorbing graduates qualified in economics. The banking sector, with its rapid expansion in the recent times, can take in specialists in economics or those conversant with economics as a subject at degree level.

Generally, although opportunities in the banks are available for graduates in economics, the advertisements do not make it clear that they wish to have only those competent in economics. The tendency in the commercial banks is to advertise and call for people of a few different disciplines such as economics, law, commerce, business administration and mathematics etc. But, at least in recent times, it became evident that advertisements did not allow room for graduates in other disciplines like languages or history a chance to apply for these jobs; only those with a select few disciplines had a chance. In the earlier years, recruitment was on the basis of the acquisition of a class, either first or second, at the degree; but now although classes are asked for, selection is confined only to those with a subject from a narrow group of listed disciplines. Among these disciplines of course, economics is one, and is sometimes preferred and emphasised. However, in branches handling economic research, it is difficult to imagine graduates other than those specialised in economics being able to function satisfactorily. With banks spreading out into the different parts of the country and also becoming more specialised in their activities economists can hopefully look for greater opportunities in the banking sector in future.

Apart from the Kachcheris, government departments, ministries and other offices, there are also several large state corporations and bodies which employ graduates. These are public sector institutions and in these corporations and boards much of the work done is related in recent times to the area of economic development. However, apart from a very few such institutions, such as the Mahaweli Board or the Agrarian Research and Training Institute, the other establishments normally have no specific sections employing economists. As a result, graduates in economics have to compete for employment in such public sector organizations along with graduates in other disciplines, because of the tendency to call for applications only from graduates in economics has not been the practice. Yet considering the nature of the work they do and their involvement in economic development it is reasonable to consider that these public establishments should absorb a fair number of graduates in economics. Even now, graduates in economics have a better chance than others to get employment in these places.

Thus we see that there are many opportunities for economists and for those who have graduated with economics as a subject available in the country. However, as I have mentioned earlier it is sometimes not specifically mentioned in many of the advertisements that economists are required. But in selection of personnel I can presume that preference is shown towards economists or those who have read economics as a discipline for the degree.

While these opportunities do exist there is also the question whether those who are turned out of the universities with an economics degree or with a general degree with economics as a subject satisfy the needs of the employing agencies. Sometimes specialists and those with an up-to-date knowledge of the discipline are needed and we have to ensure that the products from the universities are adequate in quality.

In the absence of a survey or research it is unfair to arrive at any general conclusion, but general inquiries show that many of these institutions find that those who possess a good knowledge of English, which enables them to read in their field, are the more useful ones to be employed particularly where a special understanding of economics is needed in relation to the job that is to be done. Here of course, unfortunately a large number of our university students graduate, either with a special degree or a general degree with serious shortcomings to be remedied, and I feel that the students who graduate, either with a special degree or a general degree with economics, are deficient in a knowledge of English. This may be a serious shortcoming to be remedied and I feel that if the students are given a good grounding in English under the guidance of their teachers in the universities they will read, understand

and be able to handle assignments where specialist and an up-to-date knowledge of economics is needed. As far as a knowledge of the discipline is concerned, the universities do teach enough to turn out employable economists as syllabuses tend to show.

## DISCUSSION

Prof. Bastiampillai

I will first elaborate further on a few things which have been touched upon, but which are very important. One is I think which Prof. Indraratna very rightly said how could we be suddenly asked to take in about 1000 students at the Race Course. With well over 500 Sinhala medium students on one side and the lecturer on the other side, screened away from the students, they never saw the lecturer at that time because he was completely isolated from the student audience. That was the way in which we began a second Faculty of Arts in Colombo and we were suddenly pushed over into some building which was not at all fit enough. There was no place where we could have at least created an atmosphere suitable for academic activity. This was one of the most serious of the problems that led to a certain amount of demoralization among the staff, particularly among most of the senior staff, who were interested in studying and building up their lectures and in doing their own research.

On the other hand, academics had to come and attend to all sorts of problems which were not within their competence to be tackled. We were completely over taken by a *fait accompli*. We were asked to start new courses like the one on estate management and valuation, and here again Professor Indraratne somehow or other managed to organize it satisfactorily so quickly. We had our examinations somewhere in Moratuwa at the Katubedda Campus because we were not able to hold the examinations in this course in Colombo owing to a want of facilities. And in the public finance and taxation course which once again we were asked to organize hastily, and which we did somehow; thereafter arose another lot of problems as we had to find jobs for those who qualified in it. Prof. Indraratne knows well how we went on from office to office lobbying and asking the authorities to give us jobs for these students because they were not degrees of which anybody knew anything in Sri Lanka at that time and employers were not willing to accept our graduates in new fields. Suddenly, as you can see, we had a new course of study and employers wondered why. They said that they could use very good economists instead of these people who had done new disciplines.

We were also not given the staff to teach the newly introduced subjects and we had to use the very staff who were already there. The economists or historians or geographers had to teach subjects like recreation or tourism. We were all asked to take over and teach these new areas immediately. Prof. W. P. T. de Silva, however, did handle the course on tourism.

Then, there was this concept of job-orientation and we had to have development study courses coupled along with job ranges. We had to start courses in areas like journalism, insurance and communication and we were asked to teach these unfamiliar and new subjects with no notice, or very little. There was no review made of the competence of the staff and no attempt was made to find out what the staff was capable of doing. So, very good history teachers, good geography teachers and good economists had to keep on looking for books from the British Council or somewhere else to study and teach new disciplines and subjects. We had to ask outsiders to come and give some lectures. It was a very bad experiment, on the whole, which hurt the academic staff, demoralised them and made them feel that they were insecure. They knew not what was going to come next.

Prof Hewavitharana had spoken about the very important question of the tamil medium. That's very serious problem in any university when you cannot get staff, particularly qualified staff, to teach. So you always end up by getting some relatively sub-standard staff or you depend on visiting staff, and that is a very unsatisfactory way of teaching a course, although these degrees were supposed to be on par with the degrees taught by very senior staff to the sinhala medium students or the english medium students.

Then there is also a new question, now arisen, about the english medium. We have heard all sort of comments on this. The students, however, want to study in the english medium because they feel that it will be valuable, their degree will then have more currency value in the job market. And as we have started teaching english now, it so happens that the senior teachers are the people who have to do dual sets of lectures. This contribution is not counted when the workload of the teachers is computed at least for the purpose of allocating more



teachers. Again, I want to bring it to the notice of the members of the audience, like Professor Indraratne and the Chairman, that when calculating the allocation of staff to departments of study, it is far better to see how many students follow courses in a department and try to work out the proportion of teachers to students. Otherwise, although in a subject like history, we may have sometimes underemployed staff in the case of mathematics or economics teachers will be over worked.

We have this system in our university in which you still expect students who want to do a special degree in certain disciplines like economics or geography to have got a successful grade in mathematics. Otherwise we don't allow students to do geography or economics special degrees. They have to follow a course in mathematics while they are admitted in their first year and should get a particular grade. This system is, however, not too satisfactory. I have been thinking of something new, that I have known, that sometimes as it is the practice in other universities whether we too can have some sort of an induction course in mathematics. I am sure our mathematics teachers can work out some scheme to impart at a fundamental level to undergraduates at least an (O/L) standard of knowledge in mathematics, before the usual courses begin. This sort of scheme could be tried out. I am just putting it up as an idea. Otherwise we are always going to have this problem of trying to teach mathematics to those who wish to specialise in certain disciplines and we will be trying to find all sort of solutions to this problem. We have to try some way or means to improve those deficient in mathematics who yet wish to specialise in a particular discipline like economics.

## ECONOMICS GRADUATES AND JOB OPPORTUNITIES

*by*

Dr. GAMINI ABEYSEKERA

Matching employment opportunities with expectations of those who seek jobs is always a difficult problem. In the context of a country which had a growing labour force characterized by educated youth, this problem becomes even more serious. However, if economic growth accelerates and new avenues of earnings emerge, not only can there be a reduction in unemployment but also a change in attitudes towards employment. In other words, market forces tend to influence both sides of the equation, namely the supply side and demand side. The responsibility of the policy makers, therefore will be to identify such changes and orient the educational system to facilitate a better balance between the two variables, supply of educated and trained manpower and demand for specific qualifications and skills, both in quantitative and qualitative terms.

As labour or manpower can be viewed basically as an input or a factor of production, it is possible to argue that the demand for this factor is a 'derived demand', stemming from the final demand structure of any country. Hence the demand for graduates (including economics graduates) will depend on the mix of the final product or the bundle of goods and services produced by a country. This means, in the absence of any appreciable change in the product-mix or the composition of final output the nature of job opportunities will remain more or less static. Similarly, if the rate of growth of the overall economic activities remain low, the creation of job opportunities will also lag behind. Thus, both rapid growth and structural change are required for a reduction in unemployment in absolute terms as well as for any adjustment in the imbalance between job aspirations and opportunities.

It is true that Sri Lanka has experienced an acceleration in economic activities during the past several years. The new economic policy reforms introduced in late 1977 emphasized the need for an investment and employment oriented strategy. Accordingly, the investment level in Sri Lanka which

averaged 16.0 percent of the Gross Domestic Product during 1970-77 period increased to an average level of 27.3 percent during 1978-85. In real terms, the growth rate of the economy rose from 2.9 percent to 5.9 percent over the same periods. Furthermore, unemployment which had reached an alarming proportion of 24 percent as at 1976, declined to between 12 and 14 percent by 1980's. These trends appear to have improved the job prospects for graduates in general and those with economics degrees in particular.

While it is difficult to obtain macro level data regarding the numbers of economics graduates employed consequent to the introduction of the new economic policies in late 1977, the available micro level information tends to suggest that job seekers with academic qualifications including economics have fared better than other arts graduates. This has been the case both in the public and private sectors. The feelings expressed by administrators and managers in both these sectors reflected that they considered those with an economics background as more "employable" than other graduates. Particularly, an economics graduate with a special degree without a class have entered fields such as accountancy, management and computer science. In view of the growth in employment opportunities related to banking, insurance, trade and such businesses and services, the 'waiting period' of an economics graduate has been gradually converted to a "job oriented training or leaving" period.

The relatively high rates of economic growth observed since 1978 in Sri Lanka, has been assisted to a great extent by rapid expansion in the services sector in the economy. The services sector as a whole grew at an average rate of 6.9 percent during 1978-85 compared with 3.7 per cent in the 1971-77 period. Considering the fact that the services sector accounts for more than 50 percent of the Gross Domestic Product of the country a rapid growth in this sector contributes immensely to maintain a satisfactory growth performance in the entire economy. However, the dominance of the services sector also exhibited the structural weakness of the economy because of the activities in this sector are primarily dependent on the export-import performance. Since the liberalization of the Sri Lankan economy in late 1977, the massive inflow of foreign aid helped the services sector activities to grow. This was also assisted by a greater involvement by the private sector in economic activities under a relatively free-market mechanism. The relationship of these trends to creation of employment opportunities for economics graduates is that the boom in trade, banking, insurance and such businesses had generated an unprecedented demand for manpower with better qualifications and training.

In the absence of any recent information on employment of graduates in the entire country, some data may be extracted from 1981 Census. Accordingly, the total number of graduates (including postgraduate qualified persons) among the Sri Lankan population amounted to 75,133 persons, while another 2,049 persons were pursuing degree level or postgraduate level studies at the time of the Census. Taken together, these groups represented 0.5 percent of the total population of the country. It is, however, not possible to extract information from the published census data about the number of economics graduates. Yet, some information can be obtained about the occupational categories including economists. The total number employed in all categories as at 1981 had been enumerated at 4,119,265. Of this total, professionals represented 246,384 persons or 5.98 percent, the number of teachers including universities, higher educational institutions amounted to 153,483 or 3.72 percent. However, the number of persons classified as "economists" was as low as 71 so that their percentage in the total number employed was quite negligible. Another related category to economists, accountants, represented 6,967 persons or 0.16 percent of the total employed as at 1981. However the Census classification does not reflect the numbers of graduates with an economics background employed in different fields of administrative, managerial, teaching and other service sectors.

It may be reasonable to assume that economics graduates would fall into one of the following broad occupational categories and related workers which amounted to 246,384 persons, 1) Administrative and managerial workers totalling 33,866 persons, 2) services workers amounting to 235,216 and 3) clerical and related workers involving 257,257 persons. These three categories together represented less than 18.7 percent of the total employed persons as at 1981. Therefore, even on the assumption that one out of every 20 persons in these three occupational categories had an economics degree, there would have been less than 1 percent of such graduates in the total work force. Taking the employed population in the industrial categories and assuming that economics graduates could fit in mainly to service sector composition of economic activities in creating employment for economics graduates. However, this does not mean that economics graduates are or should be employed only in the services sector there can be employment opportunities for them even in agricultural and industrial sectors.

Of the total work-force of 4,199,265 the wholesale and retail service sector employed 437,318 persons in 1981. The number of persons employed in finance, insurance, real estate and other public services amounted to 56,927 while community, social and personnel services encompassed 587,840 persons.

These three sectors appear to have offered the greatest opportunities for graduates with economics degrees. Of the total number of persons employed in 1981, those who were serving in these three sectors reflected 26.3 percent in other words, approximately one out of every four jobs have been in these three sectors. Therefore, high growth rates in these sectors witnessed during 1978—1985 period would have resulted in absorbing most of the graduates with an economics background. For example, the banking, insurance and real estate businesses grew at an average rate of about 12 percent during 1978—85 while the wholesale and retail trade sector maintained at average growth rate of about 7 percent during the same period.

Another important feature in regard to employment that has emerged since the new economic reforms were introduced in late 1977 was the preference for jobs in the private sector. The salary differential and other fringe benefits have been the major attractions in the private sector. There has been a gradual shift in the preference pattern of the job seekers away from employment in the public sector which was hitherto been considered as a stable and prestigious source of employment by many graduates. The change in the macro economic environment consequent to the liberalization of the economy and the incentives granted to private and foreign investments appear to have also contributed to this trend as the supply of jobs also increased in the private sector at a faster rate than before. The private sector activities being mainly import - export trade, commerce, banking, real estate and related businesses, the scope for employment for graduates in economics and allied fields expanded considerably since 1978. However, of the total number of persons employed in 1981 still, 38.9 percent was in the government or semi-government establishments.

A similar proportion was also employed by private sector establishments while the others belonged to the categories of employers, self-employed or unpaid family workers. With the expansion of income earning opportunities, facilities and incentives to engage in self-employment, there has been a growing interest among the unemployed to venture into their own trade/industry activities. However, it is unlikely that a large number of economics graduates would have taken to self-employment as the tendency is to consider such employment as the last resort. At the same time, in view of the economic advantages of being self-employed the opportunity cost of waiting for a job in the formal sector has also increased. Therefore, after a couple of years of trying for a job, graduates may have been willing to settle down on a self-employment venture.

According to the 1981 Census, of the total number of persons employed 1.9 percent represented graduates or post-graduate qualified persons. The highest number of graduates obviously belonged to the professional and technical categories while an equally high proportion was observed in the teaching service. It is important to note that more than 15,000 persons with degrees or equivalent qualifications were employed in clerical services. In other words, nearly 20 percent of the total number of graduates in the work force belong to this category. The inability of the economic growth process to generate adequate employment opportunities resulted in increased competition for jobs which in turn, had the effect of upgrading the level of qualifications required to secure even a clerical job.

In the context of the free market oriented economic policies adopted since late 1977, a question may be raised as to the relevance and importance of manpower planning in the educational sector. If the market forces alone can guide the production, distribution, consumption and investment activities of the economy, there appears to be no special reason for forecasting manpower needs and planning human resource development. If the supply of and demand for labour can be expected to behave and adjust according to the signals given by the market, the allocation of jobs by educational qualifications as well as the allocation of expenditure for educational purposes will also be ultimately determined by the market force, with minimum time lag and disturbance to the economy. However, it must also be stressed that planning human resource development need not necessarily mean deviating from the market mechanism and relying entirely on government intervention. Even within the market mechanism there is a place for forecasting the demand and supply in respect of a particular input or output. Hence, manpower needs can be identified and projected for the guidance of those who are taking part in the demand and supply activities in the market.

## DISCUSSION

Dr. (Mrs) P. C. Rodrigo

I will restrict myself to a couple of points only. One has to remember here that we generate our output at two levels, the general degree and special degree. The two types may have to be looked into separately where do they go, what is the demand for them, what are the imbalances etc. These aspects have been looked at in the papers presented. We know there is a growing demand for them. But there are also the imbalance at the same time. There are numbers remaining unemployed, there is a waiting period for some, there is also the question of underemploy-

ment among graduates. Now what can we as teachers do to improve the situation? Improving the employability of output is one of our concerns. But how far can we go in this respect?. There are some things within our capacity, like improving the teaching of the subject. Then there are also other things that need policy action the selections for instance. The preference for people conversant in english is some thing that has been pointed out over and over again. At what level do we tackle this? Can this be tackled at the university level or by university teachers of economics? The issue would need a deeper solution. Then another solution would be to channel graduates to self employment. There again, apart from the formal training we offer them in the discipline, there are other things that go with it. For example improving know-how managerial skill and so on. This again is something that has to be looked at the policy level.

Then, apart from the surveys that Gamini and Dr. Karunatilake were talking about, perhaps some analysis on these lines would be helpful. that is to analyse the period of waiting in the case of these graduates How long do they wait for a job, and analyse that by the nature of the class they obtain and the specialisation. (i. e. the speciality within the discipline.) That would give some indication in planning the course contents and the syllabuses perhaps. Finally, I would like to draw your attention to the small number of classes in honours courses in economics. Last year the University of Colombo had about 20 to 21 in the honours candidates and there were only 8 classes. Comparing the results with the science faculty for instance, this is an alarming situation not only from the point of view of teaching satisfaction, but also viewed against insistance of prospective employers on classes for jobs. This aspect again has to be looked into in a little more detail as to why so few obtain classes and what can we do to improve the situation. That is about all I would want to add.

Mr. H. M. R. Ellepola

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to comment on some of the factors responsible for the falling academic standards among the graduates in economics. Having listened to the speakers in the morning session I am compelled to believe that there is a general consensus that the academic standards among the economics graduates have fallen over the last several years. I believe

that it is the average standard that has fallen although there are exceptional students who perform extremely well and continue to attain a high standard of academic excellence. We are also aware that there is a substantial degree of discontent and frustration among the student population. As we heard in the morning as well as what we read from the newspapers we are told that such frustrations lead to frequent strikes and boycotting of lectures and a diversion of attention from academic work.

There is also a general belief that such discontent is to be found in larger measure in the arts faculties and not so much in the science faculties or in places where professional training is given. Perhaps a possible conclusion it is the employability and employment prospects for graduates that is at the root of the frustration displayed by undergraduates in the arts faculties. If that were to be so it is worth examining the reasons for the non employability of graduates. Probably the non-employability of graduates in a particular field may create a vicious circle. It may be urged that the low academic standards make the graduate non employable and the non employability in return contributes to the low academic standards among the graduates.

Perhaps one reason for falling standards is the quality of the students entering the arts stream in the universities. It is well known that the best minds among the student population enter the science stream seeking to get admission to the medical or the engineering faculties. Since best students try to gain admission into the science classes, often those who remain in the arts classes in many schools are the not so bright students. When it comes to university admissions, therefore, only the second rate minds enter into arts faculties. However, one correction here is necessary because this is not necessarily the case in the rural sector. In the rural areas educational facilities are scarce and facilities for education in the natural sciences are almost non-existent. As a result students have no choice but to seek education in the arts stream. Therefore, we cannot generalise that the second rate minds enter the arts stream and for that reason that all economics graduates are second rate graduates. We cannot conclude that the standards in economics have fallen necessarily owing to the inferior intelligence of the students.

Perhaps there are more important other reasons. May be the quality of teaching in the arts faculties have fallen. For answers we may have to take a hard look at the teaching arrangements, the curriculum, the nature of homework exercises and the quality of reading assignments



given to students who spend anything from 3 to 4 years in a university. One of the subjects that was mentioned in the morning was the content of university syllabuses. Several speakers mentioned that syllabuses are not generally revised or updated regularly to accommodate current developments in theory or the literature. Formal revisions in the syllabus perhaps may be necessary every year. But stagnation in syllabuses over a fairly a long period may contribute towards the falling standards in teaching. Therefore, it may be appropriate for the authorities to consider some specific course of action either to standardise the syllabuses in all the universities or to make the syllabuses more specific and more updated from time to time in each university.

Dr. Abeysekera in his presentation mentioned that the general unemployment among graduates has in fact fallen over the last several years and it was mentioned that the job opportunities for economic graduates are now brighter. I am not certain whether this in fact is the case because there has been an increase in economic activity in the economy and those who have gained employment as a result may not necessarily have obtained employment in positions commensurate with the academic qualifications they possess. Much of the employment that has been generated I believe is at levels which do not require university training and for that reason it cannot be established without further investigation that the graduate employment opportunities have increased.

On the other hand, looking at unemployment among the economics graduates gives me a feeling that there is much substance in the observation that the academic training received by the under graduate lacks job or professional content in their training. It was pointed out by Dr. Karunatilake that probably the training in micro and macro economics and quantitative techniques is defective and the students are not equipped with the basic analytical tools. As we are aware the present day economics graduates in their jobs require analytical skills to interpret and analyse the problems presented to them for analysis and solution. Probably the present day undergraduate is not adequately exposed to these analytical tools to apply them to current economic problems. Perhaps this situation may be improved by upgrading the quality of teaching and adequately exercising them with tutorials and other homework assignments.

Professor Indraratne in his paper commented on the package of monetary benefits available to the university staff. It was mentioned that the incentives for those working in the universities do not compare well with the incentives available for similar grades of personnel in other institutions. I believe that non-remunerative wages may encourage the university staff to acquire other interests in alternative places. Already there is evidence of such developments, but corrective measures are required before the problems reach an endemic stage. Once an endemic situation emerges most of the working time is likely to be devoted to work other than activities in the university. The consequence is likely to be a decline in the standards of education. It was also mentioned that teachers with good academic qualifications very often leave the universities in search of better paid jobs in other countries. Under such a situation those teachers who remain behind get overloaded with teaching work and some of the teachers are called upon to do anything from 10 to 30 hours of teaching work during a week. It was also noted that the best graduates trained by the universities are attracted to employment in non academic establishments in the country because of the higher salaries. Those who remain in the universities are those who cannot get more attractive employment elsewhere in the country. Therefore, some of the academic positions remain vacant for extended periods of time owing to the non-availability of suitable candidates to fill these positions. In such circumstances the existing teachers become over worked and the quality of teaching of necessity has to fall. Therefore an obvious solution is to improve the package of monetary benefits available to the teachers in the universities.

The other major handicap faced by the sinhala medium under-graduate is the inability to read the literature available in english. Over the last several years an effort has been made to expose the under-graduates to the english language with intensive courses of training. There is an awareness among the students that english is important and I recall that Prof. Hewavitharana himself mentioned that the participation of the undergraduates in the university english courses are higher now. Therefore it is possible that the deficiencies owing to the inability to read in english may be rectified in time to come.

Another subject that came up for discussion was the decentralization of the student population in a number of universities. Prof. Hewavitharana observed that the central province students are concentrated in the Paradeniya University. If this were to be so it is possible that the Colombo and the Ruhunu University would gain a concentration

of students from the respective regions. This looks more like a misallocation of resources. Perhaps the more rational solution has to be found through subject and field specialisation that may be allotted to each university. Then the student population to each university could be drawn on the basis of their educational or training needs. I believe some years ago the university attempted to bring out a degree of specialization in each university by giving each university an area of specialization such as natural science, social science, humanities, etc. But for some reason this attempt has failed. It may be appropriate to repeat the exercise of attaining subject specialization in each university because the worst misallocation of resources that can come about in a university is by trying to dispense education in all subjects at one university. Subject specialization in each campus can maximise on the availability of teachers as well as the financial resources. I believe I have generally gone through all the aspects of the discussions and I wish to conclude my remarks by thanking the organizers who gave me this valuable opportunity to participate at this discussion.

## DISCUSSION

(Mr. V. K. Wickramasinghe)

I will start with my experience in the National Development Bank which we started in 1979. Since then I have interviewed well over two thousand graduates for employment. So I have a fair experience in this regard. And I would like to mention that in 1979 when we started the NDB we had to make a decision of the type of qualified people we would like to have in our institution. Now project appraisal which is the primary functional area in our bank required particular competence in financial analysis which indicated that persons with an accounting background like ICMA and Chartered would be suitable. But we took a decision that we would not exclude university graduates because it was not correct to exclude people from the higher educational institutions of the country. So we advertised in the papers for 1st and 2nd class degree holders. We had a responses from about 485 applicants. I had to use some tests developed in India by the National Institute of Bank Management for recruitment of executive staff to banks in India and I used the same tests here but conducted them in sinhala, tamil and english. These tests were conducted over two days at Aquinas

College with my colleagues from the Central Bank. It was conducted for two days because the tests were fairly comprehensive - testing aptitude and numerical ability and also group leadership qualities and things like that. We narrowed down the choice to 86 candidates through these tests and we recruited 26 of them to the Bank.

I must say that we found these recruits to be adequately conversant with their subjects. Their competence in subjects like economics and even in accounting was not adequate. So we had to retain them over two years while being employed in the Bank. We supplemented their educational training using our own staff and outsiders in accounting and in economics, drawing mainly on my colleagues in the Central Bank. After two years we got them up to the required standard and I must also say we gave them parallel english language teaching because we found their comprehension of the language was inadequate. I am glad to say that today four of them have been accepted by foreign universities to read for degrees. One of them a lady, accompanied the husband to Australia and was accepted by the New South Wales University to do a degree in business economics and financial analysis. Another went to Canada's Carlton University and passed out from there and today he is in Toledo University reading for a MSc in economics. Another went to Colorado University to do a postgraduate degree and is back with us. The fourth went to Canada to do business administration. Now basically all 26 recruits have the capacity to cope with the Bank's work. But at the time we took them they were not equipped adequately. So this is the starting point.

The group we recruited were highly intelligent, there is no doubt about it because our university education is based on a highly competitive system. Unfortunately there is inadequacy in teaching and also inadequate english language comprehension. Unless we correct these shortcomings I don't see how we can really use them in our institutions. Our senior officers can guide them by telling them where the knowledge of use to the Bank is in english books. Knowledge of use for the modern world is in english books - we can't get behind that and you have to direct them by saying you go and read particular books. If I direct them in financial analysis or economics or business or law all that is still in

english. I dont see any prospect in the near future of having these books and journals, in sinhala. Unless students have comprehensive ability in english, I dont see how we can use them and train them in our own institutions. They must have that basic ability and then only can we use them and that is what we can do for the younger generation while we are at higher levels of responsibility.

It is difficult for me to appericiate why university student fail to learn english to comprehend the language. When I was in the Central Bank there was a young man who had failed the university entrance and then sort employment in the Central Bank. He was in the Exchange Control Department where I was. He decided to apply for a Japanese Government Scholarship. At that time no one applied to go to Japan every one wanted to go to the UK or USA. He was admitted to a Japanese university in Tokyo. In 1966 I went to Tokyo and I met this young man. He told me that in Japan one must be able to memorise a minimum of 3000 characters in their alphabet to learn the language. He did that and for 6 months was given intensive coaching in the Japanses language. After that he had to answer in Japanese. In the 4th year he passed out sufficiently well to be recommended to read for a Masters Degree. He is back today and is in the Department of Agriculture. I can give so many examples like this where our students have gone to the Soviet Union and learnt russian to do their degrees. They do so in China, Bulgaria and Germany, but somehow or other, there is a mental block against learning english.

Lets be frank about it. Probably I dont know it may be a hangover from our colonial past. But I dont know if we can progress really I dont see how we can tackle the question of higher education unless we are prepared to learn english. We have a certain advantage and english today a modern and accepted language for assimilating knowledge and technology. Then arising from that I would kike to mention the example of Sweden. Sweden is a small country in terms of population, though in terms of economic strength she is fairly important in Europe. Sweden is a country where they find for higher educational purpose it is very difficult to translate all the books into Swedish. First, it is too costly and secondly the books will be available late because of time lags. In Sweden, english and other foreign languages are very widely used in teaching. They insist on this because they are a small nation. They are trying to cope with the modern scientific knowledge which is vital for developing and managing a modern economy.

Also going back to my experience in Japan, I would like to draw attention in this context to the reference to Sri Lankan students using a mixture of sinhala and english words. I don't know whether Prof. Hewavitharana will agree with me, but I am afraid I don't know whether it is true to say this is a damaging tendency. I'll tell you of my experience in Tokyo where I had the good fortune to live for two months in 1966 and met a lot of Japanese people and came to understand how they have progressed. I was being taken to the Tauna Zoo a little out of Tokyo by my host Mr. Nakayama. I was in his car and while on the road we were stopped by a policeman. He told the driver "overspeedo". So I knew what the charge was against the driver of the car. And the Japanese use a lot of english words e.g. they say "moodo" when they mean mood. When you go to a restaurant in America they say the mood of the place is also a consideration. So the Japanese have adopted the english word and they say moodo. And the word for table in Japan is "tebum". If we look back at our language we see that many words accepted into the language are Portuguese or Dutch words such as "mese, puttuwa, almariya, istoppuwa" etc. I am not sure whether we should be such purists in using the sinhala language. I am sorry to say this, but my daughter is learning A L economics now and its difficult for me to understand what she is learning because in the name of sinhala we have incorporated such a large number of sanskrit words in to our language. So apparently we are purists who object to the use of english words but think nothing of using sanskrit words. In a developing technological society we don't want to use english but at the same time use sanskrit which is a language from India not quite so suited for absorbing technology, but at the same time we must keep up a Sri Lankan identity and not have anything to do with India. I don't know where we are all going but I think some fresh thinking is necessary.

India also has done better than us. They have adapted the university system to meet their needs. Two of my children are studying in India as there was no entry here with area weighted marking systems. In India I find that the type of teaching that is imparted is more directly related to the type of requirements of institutions and industry. Going back to my university days, I would like to mention something of relevance that I can remember Dr. Karunatilake will also probably remember we had an Indian by the name of Dr. Nath who held a Phd. in geography from an American University. Dr. Nath was invited by one of the student societies to deliver a lecture on American university education. One of our students who have read a book written by an englishman

on American university education informed Dr. Nath at question time that Phd. studies in America were on subjects such as the variety and number of bacteria in the under garments of women. The intention was to be little American university education but I can remember Dr. Nath defended American university education and said some laundry company would have been prepared to pay a thousand dollars or more for that thesis to use it for their own purposes. Most students at that time including myself did not agree with Dr Nath. I think our attitude to university education will also probably have to change. Then again coming back to what was discussed this morning, the problem of numbers was mentioned, of how lecturers find it difficult to cope with the problem. Large audiences using traditional methods of teaching are probably obsolete. Perhaps we should change with the time and use new media such as the TV. I am glad that the Open University has been started and we can develop this type of teaching.

Coming back to the NDB I would like to say a few words about our institution. Because we are very badly in need of people with a business administration background. There is a great lack of business administration education in this country. I am afraid the attempts we have made are too ad hoc. We need graduates in business administration to train in the use and application of project appraisal techniques in loan evaluation and follow up two primary functional areas of the Bank.

Going back to the question of teaching economics, Prof. Indraratne expressed the view that it is premature to go into postgraduate teaching, because we must try to upgrade graduate teaching first. I dont know, I am not conversant with the problem, But it would seem to me that other countries have adapted themselves to this situation by proceeding to postgraduate education on a wider scale. For example, I am aware that in India today recruitment to banks at executive levels, requires a postgraduate qualification and they have upgraded their teaching in universities to cope with postgraduate teaching. Indian universities and other educational organizations such as the well known institutes of management and technology which have very high reputations have upgraded their teaching to meet the needs of a rapidly developing technological society. If you look at it, you will find in America too the same approach has been adopted. They have treated the university degree as a basic qualification. For employment at executive levels in management, postgraduate degrees are required.

# STRATEGIES TO UPGRADE THE TEACHING OF ECONOMICS IN THE UNIVERSITIES

*by*

Dr. S. B. D. de SILVA

While teaching and learning are the twin elements in a unified process of education, there are two broad aspects of teaching which it may be possible to isolate as influencing the quality of the education that is imparted. One of these is the clarity and effectiveness of the teacher's communication with his students in regard to what is being taught, including the ability to generate and sustain their interest, considerations of the examination apart. What is involved here is teaching styles, media and modes. The second aspect of teaching is the relevance and importance of what is being transmitted in terms both of its intellectual content and of its vocational or practical value.

## **Teaching Styles Media and Modes**

In regard to the first of these, ie, clarity and effectiveness, the style and mode of teaching may range from an outright lecture with no provision for questions and answers during the lecture period, to a lecture or seminar type of lecture which allows for, and even requires participation by the students. Their intervention is likely to be on matters of clarification or else would be a critical response to the substance of a lecture and to its exposition. In reality there is, of course, a blend between the outright lecture and the discussion or seminar type, but it may still be useful to categorise each of them. Inclusive perhaps of an acknowledged intellectual (and perhaps also a social) gap between the teacher and students which some teachers may even foster, consciously or not, by a heavy or forbidding demeanour or style. The teacher enters the room, delivers his lecture, and walks away perhaps in order to attend to his more pressing material preoccupations outside the campus. In between these classroom appearances, he is not available to either his students or to his colleagues.



In contrast to the outright lecture, the discussion or seminar type involves a wide informality, as Alfred Marshall's classroom lecturers are said to have been. They were essentially in the form of a conversation with his students. The teacher does not talk down to his class but, with a sense of intellectual humility recognises that the lessons which he conducts are a process of learning for both the students and the teachers. During a lecture in a course on Comparative Agricultural Development, I found myself copying down what a student was saying. I was happy to compliment him by telling him so. The student's intervention, of course, cannot be of a free and unregulated nature such as hinders the progress of the lesson. A lecturer at a western University, I recall, dealt with such a situation which he feared was getting out of hand by telling the student, I think there is something in what you said though I seem to disagree with it. Can we discuss it after the lecture.

Staff - student relations are important in this respect, and a residential university loses an important purpose if staff student relations are circumscribed by a teacher's cold impersonality or a bureaucratic attitude in the classroom or outside, or even by his physical absence from the Department on intervening days. The customary end of year dinner party given by economics students to the Department staff, as well as the return dinner party with which the staff feel obliged to reciprocate, are scarcely helpful in removing intellectual and social barriers. They are little more than rituals at which the dinner interact with the food rather than with each other. A differentiation seems to prevail among the staff members themselves, creating a social isolation and aloofness that is detrimental to the professional development of the younger staff. It deprives them of a possible intellectual stimulus and affects the functioning of the Department as an entity.

In a number of courses dominated by contesting view points and analyses where there is no uniquely correct body of knowledge, or one that is easily verifiable or is universally accepted, and therefore, in which individuality and originality come largely into play, a lecture course with a built in discussion component may perhaps be preferred to a system of tutorials, especially when the lecturer is also not the tutor. Such courses comprise economic history, comparative economic development, political economy, and certain branches of applied economics dealing with development and policy. It is in regard to such areas of knowledge in particular that Barbara Wootton's "Lament for Economics" probably applies,

In these courses, if separate tutorial classes are held, it would be necessary that the tutor attends the lectures for which he is tutor or keeps in close touch with the lecturer.

The importance of tutorials is liable to be magnified out of proportion. As I mentioned earlier not every course or every topic in a course needs tutoring or is amenable to tutoring, tutorials, if they do not require the reading out of written answers (compelling students to produce some written work), but are devoted to resolving or clarifying difficult portions of a lecture, may turn out to be a replay or a replication of the original lecture as I found to my dismay at the University of Penang. Students who probably were inattentive during lectures would in the tutorial class briefly recall some point or other that was mentioned in the lecture with a request, 'Would you elaborate on that?' I then had to repeat whole sections of a lecture that had already been given. The students' critical response to the lecture was hardly forthcoming.

The difference in these teaching styles may appear to be a matter of inclination, reflecting the teacher's personality, his sense of confidence, and the atmosphere of formality/informality which is allowed to pervade the classroom. All the same, the choice between the outright lecture and one which allows for classroom discussion is also influenced by what provision exists for post-lecture tutorials and seminars and by the nature and subject matter of the course itself. In the absence of tutorials, a discussion component that is built into the lecture may be useful for two reasons. For one thing it may partially overcome the effects of a lack of tutorials or their serious inadequacy (a problem which because of chronic staff shortages has plagued the Economics Department of Peradeniya in recent years). For another thing, a lecture-cum-discussion would also inform the teacher on the spot, as he goes along, about the clarity or lack of clarity of his classroom efforts and of the receptivity and level of comprehension of his students. The discussion component interlaced with the lecture would provide a continuous assessment of the progress of both teacher and student.

Universities abroad attach much importance to teaching methods and styles as much as to the subject matter of lectures (to which I shall refer later). In the University of Penang, it was not unusual for the Head of the Economics Department to advise the newer staff on these matters or to judge their teaching skills by sitting in with the students at a few of the lectures given by them. He would tactfully reassure these lecturers that they were themselves welcome to attend lectures given by the Head of the Department. The role of the university teacher essentially is to structure a problem or topic rather than replicate the material that is already available in standard text books or journal articles. His role is to lay bare and give the guts of the problem, the 'low-down' on it, presenting the problem both in its totality

and in terms of its different components, finally bringing together the various bits and pieces which compose the totality. In courses where there is no unique body of testable knowledge or a convergence of views, the university teacher besides being able to comment critically on the existing literature must have a personal input to contribute. What is basically important is the logical concepts, tools of analysis and powers of reasoning. The student must be taught to think rather than to reproduce.

It is an ability of this kind which enables some, though not all visiting economists from abroad to make a quick analysis or assessment of an economic problem or situation, however unfamiliar they might be with the details of it. These basic analytical skills are evident, for example, in the papers by Visiting Economists which the Planning Department had published several years ago - written by John Robinson, Kaldor, the Hickses, Kalecki, Myrdal, and so on. Many of them had not been in Sri Lanka before but were able within an incredibly short stay of 2 to 3 weeks to decide in and to marshal the relevant data and develop fairly sharp insights on economic development and policy which were outside the framework of questions to which they were accustomed. It is the type of ability which should enable, say, a Sri Lanka agricultural economist to report with confidence, say on tulip gardening in Holland, on his first visit to that country, without being deterred or constrained by the fact that his academic or professional background until then was not in tulips but in paddy, chillies and green gram. But how many of us would find ourselves to be totally lost if somewhat outside the specific topic or the framework within which we were trained?

This also applies to the theories which dominate the study of certain branches of economics. The exposition of economic theory is liable to be limited by a failure to adequately emphasise and clarify their underlying assumptions. Such assumptions are merely a reference point, a first approximation to a real world situation and they, therefore, need to be relaxed at some stage or another. While theory is important in its own right, and in the absence of theory analyses become degraded to a description of isolated facts, it is necessary to link up a theory with real world situations and explanation. Thereby the limits of the existing theories would be uncovered and the possible need shown for alternative theories which are a better mirror of reality. Eg: in the Theory of Comparative Costs students are often oblivious of its key assumptions full employment of resources and a uniform levels of development of countries engaged in trade.

An exposition of this sort inevitably involves a joining of economic theory to a study of applied economics. While the Theory of Comparative Costs with its elegant, and slightly complicated geometrical constructs seeks to explain why trade takes place between two or more countries, and the commodity pattern of trade, of the theory is not to be left in mid-air it becomes necessary also to proceed to questions concerning alternative patterns of production and trade, some of which, if realised, may be superior to others and the very practical question of how a country could overcome an existing pattern of production and trade in favour of another.

### Scope and Substance of Lecture Courses

Probably there is in the Economics Department not merely a neglect of teaching methods and procedures but also inadequate attention to the scope and substance of lecture courses. A question that must be continually in our minds is what exactly are students being taught and tested in at the Examinations?

In recent years in underdeveloped countries economists on and off, have referred to an air of unreality in their subject. But this is usually attributed to the unsuitability of 'western concepts' eg: for analysing the unemployment problem, this being a structural problem and generally one of underemployment. Two such critics (Vera Anstey and Anne Martin), while accepting the general validity of economic theory as developed in the west, have pointed to the structural rigidities preventing the adaptation of existing models and even to a difficulty in communicating to students in countries such as ours fundamental (and often) simple economic principles or truths. Such a criticism of course, obscures the limitations of new-classical economics, preventing the western economists from effectively exploring even the economic problem of their own society.

The accent on economics resulted in an irrational or religious conception of the economy as though the economist is in possession of a kind of revealed knowledge about the working of the economy. In the quoted remark of Lionel Robbins "The borderlands of economics are the happy hunting ground of minds averse to the effort of exact thought"

On the other hand, a belated recognition of the suffocating exclusivism of economics has led social science departments of universities to introduce "inter - disciplinary" multi - disciplinary studies. But a refusal to see the fragmentation of knowledge as one aspect of the stultifying framework of

neoclassical economics has negated the effect of these curricular reforms. The various disciplines are merely juxtaposed, and studied in isolation instead of being interwoven in their application. The disciplines are related to each other like the members of an espionage network, each one not knowing the other'.

What all this seems to suggest is the need for a core course at least for economics special students, giving them a firm grounding in the history of economic thought, with an emphasis on classical economics. Such a course should include a component relating to the scope and subject matter of economics, in its philosophical, sociological and methodological aspects as seen by the different schools of economics. It should also seek to place economic problems in the setting of alternative economic systems with their different class structures and patterns of property rights and income and the role of the state. Economic problems should not be analysed exclusively or even predominately in terms of a market economy which sanctifies private property. In so far as economic problems and policies are politically determined, it is also necessary to present these problems and policies both in their totality incorporating their non economic aspects and putting them also in a specific socio-historical setting. A core course of this kind, however difficult it may be to devise or to control, should be a fleeting exploration of the changing conceptual basis of economics, the relativity of economic propositions and models, and the political elements in the shaping of economic theory.

Course outlines with brief reading lists, suitably annotated are necessary both for students and for the Department as a whole more especially to those teaching related courses. They are also a guide to new lecturers. Likewise syllabuses need periodic revision to conform with advances in knowledge and of the changing emphasis to be accorded to different topics in the light of national priorities or current socio historical realities. Much of this, although lost sight of locally, is standard procedure in universities the world over. In the absence of periodical adjustments to the contents of and emphasis in courses, the lecturers in them become like members of a relay team passing on an increasingly worn-out baton to a fresh batch of students each year. The lectures in certain courses are even known to relate directly to specific examination questions. While lecturers should have a measure of autonomy in regard to the contents of their courses, obviously such independence cannot be total or absolute. If course outlines are to be relevant and significant, either intellectually or from a vocational stand point, the outline should have the benefit of a plurality of opinions and that means the general acquiescence of the Department.

## DISCUSSION

Prof. W. D. Lakshman

There was in this seminar a statement of a mere assumption of falling standards in university economics education without, I believe, indicating any criteria used in arriving at that judgement. In fact one of the reasons why I hesitated to contribute a paper on the theme which I was asked to write on was that the suggested title itself, namely "the reasons for falling standards in economics education" takes the above unsubstantiated judgement as established. One ought to examine the question using some criteria. During the short period I was here, there was however, no mention of any criteria adopted in coming to the said conclusion. I am not trying to defend the system of economics education in universities today but I stress the need to develop some criteria to be used in evaluating the existing system.

It is mostly the interpretation of the interviewers, sitting in various interview panels, asking questions from the graduate applicants, that university educational standards in general and in economics education in particular are lower today than a couple of decades ago. The graduates so interviewed are facing interviews with considerable trepidation of mind. It is a life and death kind of matter for them to get a job or not to get a job. I tell my students always that when they go in future for job interviews they must do so with a feeling of hope, a feeling of "If I don't get this job I will get another one". I ask them to answer the questions raised with confidence with no concern of the job in question. But that kind of attitude is difficult to generate within these students. The bulk of the students who pass out from universities today are coming from relatively poor social strata and or are from rural backgrounds. They do not normally have the kind of ability, the kind of social environment the older generation of graduates had, which made the latter more confident at interviews. I think it is wrong to judge the quality of the present day graduates by their performances in these interviews. By the same token, these interviews are also a poor guide to judge the quality of university education today.

I would like to know how many MA's and Ph.Ds are there in this country at the moment in economics among the students who have had their undergraduate studies in the sinhala medium and who the interviews would have judged to be of poor quality at one stage or another.

I submit as a very rough guess that about 75% of those with postgraduate qualifications in economics today, including myself as Mr. Chairman mentioned, are those who had their undergraduate education in the sinhala medium.

There are no doubt certain weaknesses in the type of graduates we produce. These are due to shortcomings in our entire educational system from secondary school onwards. But if one is talking of purely the nature and the extent of knowledge they gain in the universities, then one ought to be careful in coming to a general conclusion that present day graduates are of poor quality. I would take into consideration here the period of my study in the University of Ceylon at Peradeniya. During that period, until I believe about 1970, we studied just nine subject areas for the Special Degree whatever our specialization was. We studied these 9 subjects in 3 years after GAQ. On the basis of the performance at 9 papers set on these subjects we were given our degree. When we compare the situation today for example in Colombo, special degree students sit for 8 papers each one of which is on a different subject area, within the chosen specialisation or the same subject at different degrees of depth. In Peradeniya, 12 papers are taken into consideration for granting the special degree and in addition to the SAQ level subjects the students follow, they take up 18 courses there too. I am not totally familiar with the other two or three universities where economics is taught at special level. I think Ruhuna also has an 18 course special degree programme of the Colombo type. May be not in terms of the depth, but at least in terms of the breadth of subject area covered, the students who are passing out today, I submit, have a wider knowledge. But the bulk of them may not be able to put that knowledge across effectively in the presence of interview boards. They have to be given a chance. I think the bulk of them will turn out to be good in their work. That is why we have so many PhDs and MAs in economics from among swabhasha medium graduates. This is probably not the only criterion of achievement to be used. The point is that most of the students who were made to face the challenge, have come out with good results. Those who did not have sufficient competence in English have become, with experience, extremely clever in handling that language. This general impression of falling standards, therefore, has to be treated with care.

If we are going to judge the quality of economics graduates who are passing out on the basis of their performance in the interviews, I think, we are missing the point. The quality of graduates, whatever their dis-

ciplines are, has to be tested over a long period of time. And I for one, believe that the breadth of knowledge in the subject area they learn now are definitely very much wider than what we had to study in the university about 20 years ago.

To conclude, there were also certain other misconceptions expressed in certain presentations earlier about the role of a university. The universities are not expected to produce people who can get into a job and immediately start performing that job efficiently. We are not expected to impart those job skills to students. They have to acquire these on the job. What we are trying to do, hopefully, is to build up complete human beings. Of course, the present day university set up has numerous constraints and limitations in this regard. But we try to achieve the classical university objective of building up complete human beings within the existing limitations. It is the task of the employer to train who ever he recruits to do the specific jobs he wants the employee to do.



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