

How should we reform the higher education system in Sri Lanka?

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Powerful forces of IT, telecommunication and globalisation are driving an increasing societal demand for higher education. Knowledge has become the currency of the new global market, determining the wealth of nations, individual standards of living and quality of life. Countries such as Australia, UK and USA have turned higher education into billion dollar industries. The 1983 American report '*A Nation at Risk*' accused its education system for the economic and social ills of the country demanding radical reforms in all states. Japan reformed its education system in building the Second Largest Economy. Asian Financial Crisis forced Thailand to undertake radical education reforms.

Archaeological, historical and scholarly records suggest that Sri Lanka had a well advanced education system during the Fifth Century and even in 1815 when she was becoming a British colony. But where are we now? Statistics reveal that in 2002, only 6.4% are seeking admission and that 13% of those qualified joined universities. Data suggests that since 1967 student numbers increased only marginally. Have we deviated from the colonial policy, and diversified the programs to face the modern era? How can we boast about the 90% literacy being the highest in South Asia when higher education placements are much lower than that of India and Pakistan? Current situation suggests problems faced by the system are serious, requiring radical steps to integrate the country with the global society. A dominant concept that emerged in the modern world is that leaders need not react to changing situations as they unfold, but can consciously direct the forces to suit predetermined objectives and goals on a well-articulated vision. This paper proposes to address these issues based on both empirical studies and documentary analyses conducted in Australia, UK, USA, Norway, Sweden, Japan, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

Key words: Education reforms; Higher education; Information technology;
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