

Book Review: Humanities and Social Sciences Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present and Future

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This is an essay about the book “*Humanities and Social Sciences Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present, and Future, Volume III: Premakumara de Silva... [et al.]—University Grants Commission, Government Press, Colombo: 2022, 332 pp. (ISBN 978-624-5980-09-3)*” reviewed as a commentary on the evolution of tertiary-level Humanities and Social Science (HSS) education in Sri Lanka. This essay will provide an in-depth analysis of the content of the book from a holistic point of view, highlighting the interconnectedness of parts I through VI, with a conclusion that discusses in part VII ‘Plans for Future’ and the concluding remarks of the book itself. Therefore, review comments for some chapters may not be in the same order as they appear in the book. This essay reviews how the content of the book addresses the relationship between HSS education and the country’s social problems, such as deepening inequalities of wealth, lack of employment opportunities for HSS graduates, persistent authoritarian regimes, imperfect democracies, corruption, and inadequate systemic responses to them.

KEYWORDS: Humanities, Social Sciences, Sri Lankan, Universities, Education, Teaching, Learning

INTRODUCTION

The word ‘education’ has its roots in Latin, with ‘educare’ meaning ‘bringing up’ and ‘educere’ meaning ‘bring out’ or ‘lead forth’. The evolution of the word brought the meaning to refer to instructions in social codes and manners. The phrase ‘formal education’ refers to ‘systematic schooling and training that can help one be a productive citizen within the socio-economic and political framework one lives in’. Through structured and systematic teaching and learning experiences, the formal education process is expected to cultivate intellectual, social, emotional, and physical growth in students, preparing them to be well-rounded, critical, and socially responsible citizens of the world. In this process, the role of humanities and social science education in universities cannot be understated. In Sri Lanka, a nation of rich cultural heritage and diverse traditions, the significance of these disciplines takes on a profound meaning as they play a pivotal role in shaping the nation’s future.

As we delve into the pages of the book “*Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present and Future,*” we embark on a journey that scrutinizes the challenges, triumphs, and opportunities that define the landscape of higher education in the humanities and social sciences within the country. Authored by scholars in respective fields of study and educationists, this illuminating volume addresses the complexities and transformations taking place in the realm of Sri Lankan higher education. Starting with the history and present status, this book confronts the critical question: How can Sri Lankan universities revitalize and redefine humanities and social science education to meet the evolving demands of a rapidly changing world?

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Gary Becker, the recipient of the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1992, dedicated his research efforts to studying the economic dimensions of various social issues, including education, crime and punishment, and family relations. In 1964, he introduced the concept of “human capital” through his book of the same name. In his work, Becker viewed education not merely as a form of consumption that incurs costs for the government but as an investment that enhances the economic value of individuals, effectively termed “human capital.” By improving the skills and knowledge of individuals through education, a country’s overall productivity and economic competitiveness can be elevated (Becker, 1964).

Over the last two decades, there has been a continuous push to strengthen science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) education. However, educators worldwide unanimously agree that a parallel effort to enhance humanities and social sciences education is equally, if not more, crucial (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2013). Given the multiple challenges affecting human well-being, such as economic, military, ecological, religious, and technological concerns, the significance of being knowledgeable across all fronts of the humanities and social sciences cannot be overstated (Mapping the Future, 2013). As the world faces the daunting task of preparing the next generation of citizens, who must be educated comprehensively to actively engage in governance and interact efficiently with the global community, the University Grants Commission's (UGC) initiative to examine the past and present of humanities and social science education in Sri Lankan universities with the intention of planning for the future is not only a fruitful way to celebrate the hundred years of university education in the country but also an extremely timely endeavor at this critical juncture of the socio-economic and political history of the country. Chapters in the volume are mainly based on the papers presented at the Centenary Celebrations of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) Education in Sri Lankan Universities (1921–2021) held in December 2021, organized by the Standing Committee of HSS, UGC.

This review focuses on *Humanities and Social Sciences Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present and Future Volume III*: as a collection of eighteen chapters arranged into seven parts according to their thematic relevance. The volume is edited by Premakumara de Silva, Wimal Hewamanage, Asha Nimali Fernando, and Lalith Ananda, published by the University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka, printed at the Government Press of Sri Lanka, Colombo, 2022. This book came out as Volume III of a three-volume series in which the first two were named ‘Beyond Boundaries: One Hundred Years of Humanities and Social Sciences in Sri Lankan Universities; Volume I: Humanities and Volume II: Social Sciences’. Together, these three volumes can be considered a much-needed self-evaluation of HSS education in Sri Lankan universities since its inception.

ANALYTICAL REVIEW

Historical Perspective

Part I: Higher Education in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective consists of Chapter 1: ‘Education in Pre-Modern Sri Lanka: Scope, Content, and Institutions’ and Chapter 2: ‘Reflections on the Growth and Development of University Education in Sri Lanka: A Historical Perspective’ contextualizing the establishment of higher education in the country. This part prepares the reader’s mind to see the growth and evolution of ‘modern’ university education in the Sri Lankan context by taking him through the historical development of Buddhist monastic education from the pre-colonial period all the way to the post-colonial period. What is perhaps even more important is the effort the authors of these two chapters make to highlight the challenges to increasing access and improving the quality of undergraduate

education in Sri Lanka due to a lack of funding as important points to keep in mind for the whole journey through the book. The two chapters suggest improving the opportunities for professional development for university academics, upgrading the expertise of administrative staff of all higher educational institutions, and increasing and strengthening collaborative efforts involving the UGC, state universities, institutes, and the private sector as some of the areas to be investigated further. However, the authors' suggestions to reform educational policies (with the input of university academics and industry experts) to create an inviting environment for privately owned higher educational institutes as a remedy for a lack of state funding for universities may not be received by the public without a long and hard debate on the topic.

Current Status

We will explore Part II: Current Status of Humanities and Social Sciences Education, consisting of Chapter 3: 'Present Status of Humanities Education in Sri Lanka' and Chapter 4: 'Current Status of Social Science and Humanities Education: An Exploratory Study' and Part IV: Teaching, Learning and Assessment, consisting of Chapters 10 and 11: 'Collaboration for Teaching and Assessment in Higher Education: Merits, Issues, and Quality Assurance' and 'Redesigning Learning Environments to Enhance Creation and Sharing of Open Educational Resources' respectively. The authors in Part II focus on the evolving significance of traditional disciplines, such as languages, literature, and history, in an increasingly globalized world. Despite the dynamic changes in various human endeavors and the resulting complexities in society, they argue that a broader approach that prioritizes critical thinking, advanced skills, and analytical abilities in HSS education is needed. Chapter 3 includes a brief history of the evolution of humanities subjects into what they are today around the world, providing an opportunity for the reader to do his own comparative analysis on the current situation of the same in any specific country. The graduates produced through such a program should be open-minded, empathetic, and sensitive individuals who are able to understand fellow human beings across ethnic, religious, cultural, and national boundaries. Both chapters emphasize the need to reevaluate not only the country's higher education but also the entire education system from pre-K up to postgraduate level, where the degree programs and course syllabi within the university system are not solely decided by the available employment opportunities at the time but by focusing on the ways to help the next generation become better and more productive citizens of the world who can understand other humans better. Besides, if the education system depends on the job market, then all such a system should be able to do is teach artificial intelligence (AI) so that people can make robots to take care of all their other needs. There are a lot of people around the world who lost their jobs due to the advancements of technology. In fact, COVID-19 gave people a chance to experience the formal education process without any human face-to-face interaction. If the idea is extended with rapidly developing applications of AI and education stays only as a prerequisite for employment, then the day university professors and schoolteachers become obsolete may not be that far away. However, the authors in Part II show that such things do not always progress in linear paths by pointing out how the world is beginning to understand the importance of HSS education after about a half a century long rendezvous with STEM education, where each subject was subdivided into more and more specific areas of study, now promoting interdisciplinary education. Now the universities are offering courses such as 'Engineering Sociology' and 'Medical Humanities', pushing the STEM education systems towards STEAM (A – Arts) education. Reading through the personal experience of certain workshops shared by the author of Chapter 4, one gets a chance to see what happens even with multimillion dollar projects launched by international organizations such as the World Bank (WB) or the United Nations (UN) under the guise of improving education, especially in developing countries. At least some of the participants have realized that the resource person herself had not

understood the definition of The Social Determinants of Health, a course of which she was trying to explain how to write the 'Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) for. One other very important aspect, avoided by most critics, of university education brought up in Chapter 4 is the quality of the academics responsible for training the next generation of the nation. Careerist academics concentrated not on research and pedagogy but patronage and political connections to further their careers, and the privilege and gatekeeping practices of incompetent senior academics restricting the exposure of the juniors to critical and cutting-edge scholarship are two of the leading causes mentioned in Chapter 4 as responsible for the deterioration of HSS education in Sri Lanka.

Graduate Employability

Part III: 'Arts' Graduate Employability' consists of Chapters 5 through 9 each addressing a different aspect of the employability issue, including stakeholders' perception, an economic analysis, and an attempt to answer the question whether this is an exercise of trying to put 'square pegs in round holes.' Several authors mention the fact that unemployed or underemployed HSS graduates could have found better employment had they had mastery of the English language. This is true not only for HSS graduates but also for any candidate for graduate level jobs, and it should not be a surprise to anyone since English is still considered the international language of communication. Therefore, we will explore Part III together with Part V: 'English Language Skill' consisting of Chapters 12 and 13: 'Building Confidence to Speak English' and 'Developing Reading and Writing Skills in English' respectively. Chapter five highlights the lack of coordination and cooperation among the stakeholders, including academics, administrators of educational institutes, students, industrialists, government officials, and policymakers, as main constraints in the process of placing HSS graduates in suitable positions in the employment maze. The author's explanation about the causes behind such poor coordination, one of which is a lack of awareness about mutual expectations among stakeholders, would be helpful in planning for improvements in the employability of HSS graduates. Chapters six and seven explore the theoretical aspects regarding unemployment numbers within the framework of the market economy, describing the mismatch between skills developed through HSS degrees and the skills needed. While highlighting the importance of studying and understanding various factors influencing the employability of HSS graduates, chapter seven brings the importance of minimizing the errors in such studies to the forefront. What the academic community must focus on, especially, are the end users of their studies. If the results from such studies with errors are used by the universities to improve their programs, then they would even end up destroying what is already working well. If policymakers are advised based on such misguided conclusions, then they will end up implementing policies that can destroy the whole education system. Therefore, paying serious attention to the whole process of designing and carrying out such studies is an important aspect of finding corrective measures to improve the employability of HSS graduates. Though there is a risk of turning the degree into a vocational training program, the universities will have to introduce necessary changes to HSS education so that developing much needed soft and employable skills is also a regular part of the program. In that context, introducing innovative ways for the undergraduates to improve their language skills, especially reading, writing, and speaking in English, as chapters twelve and thirteen describe, would be invaluable.

Research and Innovation

We will discuss Part VI: 'Research, Innovation, and Publication' consisting of Chapters 14 through 16 addressing the process of publishing scholarly work and university-industry collaboration, together with Part VII: 'Plans for Future' consisting of Chapters 17 and 18 presenting the plans for future development in HSS education in state universities and opportunities and challenges in international collaborations in the field of higher education.

These five chapters could have been grouped into one section with the title: 'Future of HSS Education in Sri Lankan Universities through Research and Innovation' since it is the research and innovation or research and development (R & D) culture that improves not only the process of teaching and learning but also extends the tentacles of the academic network towards the industry and to the global community. An interesting observation pointed out in Chapter 15 is the fact that most people tend to associate the word 'innovation' only with disciplines based on the natural sciences and do not know what kind of innovations could be related to HSS. Chapters fourteen and fifteen highlight the challenges the researchers, especially the younger researchers entering the exploratory world of HSS, encounter within the hierarchical and undemocratic environment of academic publishing. They emphasize the significance of creating a conducive environment, democratic principles of freedom and equality, and strong social networks to foster research and innovation within the university system.

CONCLUSION

Humanities and Social Sciences Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present, and Future Volume III, which came out as the anchor of a three-volume series examining the topic through the last one hundred years, gives a bird's-eye view of the landscape of HSS education within the university system of Sri Lanka. Readers can appreciate the fact that the discussion is not only about the achievements but also about the setbacks and the relevance and legitimacy of the questions such as the quality of the graduates, the quality assurance of study programs, and the employability of the graduates with degrees in humanities and social sciences. Concluding the series with a self-evaluation about the UGC itself, the policymakers, and the academic community in general not being serious enough in making a legitimate effort to bring sustainable solutions to improving the Research and Development (R&D) culture and the employability of the graduates in these disciplines could certainly be appreciated as an unbiased self-criticism.

However, assessing the impact of HSS education on creating a better world go beyond just producing measurable outcomes since the indicators themselves are intertwined with broader societal and cultural changes. Though most of the authors seem to support the idea that universities are not just factories producing human resources for the labor market, the volume editors seem to have felt that the employability of HSS graduates is more important than discussing research and innovation or the way forward. That may be one of the reasons why there are more chapters discussing the topic 'Graduate Employability' than any other topic in the volume. Max Weber, in his speech 'Science as a Vocation', in 1917, said: "In this instance, this means starting with the question: What form does science take as a profession in the material sense of the word?" (Gerth & Mills, 1946). Perhaps an attempt to answer a similar question: "What form do HSS take as professions in the material sense of the word?" and a discussion about how to make the market ready for the HSS graduates rather than trying to make the graduate ready for the market would have provided a more analytical view about the employability issue. As the authors in Part III, 'Graduate Employability' mention, most of the HSS graduates seek state sector employment. Therefore, a larger portion of their job market consists of state sector institutions. This might encourage the state to influence the university academics and administrators to introduce degree programs designed according to the vacancies they might have at the time. People might not see anything wrong with it, especially if the universities are funded by the state. However, in countries like Sri Lanka, where most of the citizens do not understand the difference between the 'state' and the 'government' and where corrupt politicians who would only be concerned with their individual gain through their

party's ability to be in power, it will be the government that dictates the curricula and degree programs to universities, together with recruiting administrators and even academics who would support their agenda. Max Weber insisted that allowing scholarship to be so closely aligned with the state's agenda meant cultivating "political obedience among university students," and this was sure to prove catastrophic for universities. It would lead to the "castration" of academic freedom and stunt the "development of a genuine" scholarly character. He further said that: "Universities may have been better off under the church's influence; at least then they pursued something other than money and power" (Reitter & Wellmon, 2020).

Sri Lankans have had a good opportunity to experience the benefits of designing employment oriented degree programs since it was tried after the 1971 youth insurrection. One of the root causes of this was the mismatch between the graduates and the job market of the country. It was proven to be elusive, even after a series of curriculum reforms spanning several decades. The issue involved is something beyond university curriculum reforms, extending into the performance of the overall economy of the country as well as various other factors influencing labor market movements. Systematic analysis of global transformations affecting international markets, international trade and payment systems, relationships between nations, foreign exchange rate regimes, and wars in different regions of the world and their impact on the Sri Lankan economy and the education system would make it easier for the reader to grasp the interconnectedness of almost all the disciplines of the social sciences. This will help people see graduate employability as a socio-political as well as an economic issue rather than a curriculum issue (Lakshman, 2021).

Suggestions made by the authors of *Humanities and Social Sciences Education in Sri Lankan Universities: Past, Present, and Future Volume III* to improve HSS education within the university system in the country, starting from changing recruitment methods of academics to delivery methods, funding for research, introducing the subjects in other areas of study, and educating the public in the process of achieving social harmony, are food for thought not only for educators but also for policymakers and investors.

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