Editorial

It would not be unnatural for a theme-based university review journal to select higher education as its theme. After all, it would be quite hypocritical for academics to spend their working lives examining everything around them but not themselves as educators, or educational policy!

The more pertinent question, therefore, would not be why higher education, but why now? To this there is an answer that is innocent enough. This year, on 21st January, we celebrated the centenary of the establishment of the Ceylon University College, considered the beginning of the modern university system in Sri Lanka. The celebrations were understandably rather muted, given the significant restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the centenary presented us with an opportunity not only for celebration but also a stock-taking involving self-reflection on our successes and failures as academics and higher education institutes (HEIs).

Exploring higher education can take several forms. Firstly, there can be an academic analysis of issues of, and within, higher education, especially in relation to its definitions and what it is often conflated with, and why it is important for our society to preserve and strengthen it. Topics that reflect this line of inquiry include academic freedom, institutional autonomy, the role of critical thinking, justifications for the expensive upkeep of HEIs, the broader meaning and purpose of education and so on. How do we decide our answers to these questions? Who are the stakeholders in it, and how should and could they be involved in the exploration? What is its promise and what should it promise?

Secondly, there can be an exploration of governance. How should the governance structures of HEIs be designed in order to ensure that higher education delivers what it promises? To what extent should the tax-payer Rupee, the industrial or corporate cheque, the international funding agency's loan and the local community's voice be part of this? To what extent should the academia be protected from these direct and immediate concerns so that its more broad and secular concerns are given the space to grow and flourish? How tall should the ivory tower be, and how do we strike the right balance?

Thirdly, there could be a focus on administration. Composing policy statements, writing mission statements and making micromanagement decisions are fine, but how do we actually walk the talk? What are the features in our society that impinge on the implementation of those decisions? What becomes of practicalities, feasibilities, pragmatisms – or their absences? What rocks the boat?

Fourthly, there can be a cultural analysis. In the end, all our plans and strategies would work at ground level not because there are circulars, by-laws, memos, notices, offices and moneys spent (all of which are important), but because of the cultural environment that we inhabit, create and recreate. It has the potential to make or break our effort, future destinies and even our very resolve. It is not only Rutherford who discovered the atom or Watson and Crick (and Franklin) that discovered the double helix – they did so because of the specific cultural milieu of Cambridge. Academic environments are not made by policy decisions or official communiques – they are created and given life to by academics who believe in them and give of their time and labor. Before higher education gives its society any gifts, it must have the intellectual culture, which means a conducive environment for learning, questioning, debate and vision.

An ideal review on the theme of higher education should cover this wide ground. The two articles we begin with (the first, by Panduka Karunanayake, on the status of the higher education industry today, and the second, a reflection by Asanga Tilakaratne on the history of Buddhist Studies in Sri Lanka) were invited as non-peer review contributions to the *UCR* precisely because they ask the broader, existential questions on the meaning of higher education by pointing to the shifts in educational environments that have shaped our universities to become institutionalized in the way they have, and for academic disciplines to become what they are today. The peer reviewed articles that follow also engage with some of the issues we highlighted as necessary for a thematic inquiry on higher education, although at times they do so by implication because they focus on specific challenges faced by the higher education sector. Two articles, the first by Dushyanthi Mendis, and the second by Kaushalya Perera, for instance, discuss the impositions of external funding (by the World Bank) on English proficiency courses taught at universities, without broad stakeholder consultations or acknowledgement of the expertise of teachers in the field. They beg the question, therefore, of who really drives the curriculum and pedagogies on English language teaching in Sri Lankan universities today?

We also include reviews and analyses of the pedagogical forms that have emerged as responses to the radical disruption the COVID-19 pandemic has caused on education. Two articles, by Manjula Vithanapathirana and Achala Dissanayake provide, respectively, an extensive and up-to-date review of blended learning, and a discussion on online learning as an emergency response to the inability of conducting in-person classes because of the pandemic. They point to the necessity of well-designed pedagogical interventions rather than ad-hoc measures, and to the provision of better infrastructure and training in IT for both academics and students if e-learning is to become something more than a stopgap.

Equity has been a traditional core value of Sri Lankan education ever since it was offered universally from primary to tertiary level. However, even as universities become more cognizant of the range of rights, entitlements, duties and responsibilities that equity implies, how does it actually work on the ground? This is a question Shalini Abayasekara explores in her article entitled "Universal Assessment: Reflections on Equitable Evaluations in a Sri Lankan Higher Education Classroom" which is based on a case study of the types of assessments (mid-term assignments as well as summative assessments) that an

undergraduate student with a disability had to complete. The findings point to uneven practices across the board, as well as to how students with disabilities themselves prefer to be distinct at times and not at others. The implications of these shifting standpoints and uneven assessment practices returns us to the broader question of inclusive education and how we walk the talk on diversity and equity in higher education.

The review article which follows on nursing education by W.G.C. Kumara and W.S.S. Sudusinghe raises similar concerns on equity. It explores, through a literature review, what nursing education requires if it is to be on par with global educational standards and provide the nursing knowledge and skills the global healthcare sector demands. By spotlighting what should be included in the Sri Lankan nursing degree curricula, the authors underscore what it currently lacks, including support for the professional advancement of nurses. Sustainability, as both a core principle and a practice in higher education, becomes crucial, and the final article in this edition of the *UCR*, on teaching and learning sustainability in Business Management Studies by Sashika Abeydeera, highlights this point, including on the need to expand our conceptualization of sustainability itself.

As these articles reflect on these issues, it is moot to ask what their anxieties and discontents signify. It is good to remember that a university discontented is a university that sits in the right spot between society's elites and its average citizens because it struggles with the status quo. In an imperfect world, such a struggle is an important duty. At the same time, we must keep in mind that societies are constantly in flux, and that higher education is forever a work-in-progress. For higher education to do its duty, therefore, it must always strive to reach higher, and that requires reflection, insight, adaptability, courage and maneuverability. This is why academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and conducive university cultures and governance are of paramount importance: without them we cannot even begin to define what higher education should be, and how to fulfil its promise.

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