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MAJOR PROBLEMS AND ISSUES IN SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITY SYSTEM – STUDY FOCUS ON THE STUDENT PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

The study discusses the major issues and problems of students in university system in Sri Lanka. A comprehensive literature is reviewed and critical discussion is offered from the findings of researches conducted by various authors of different regions. Along with detailed view of scholarly researches on students' issues and problems, an empirical investigation is incorporated taking the sample from public universities in Sri Lanka. An estimate of 100 respondents in different degree programme and different degree levels was administered in the Faculty of Management Studies, Rajarata University of Sri Lanka. A self-constructed survey scale of 18 items was distributed to the students and taken back simultaneously. Study also conducted a focus group along with quantitative data to identify the insights of phenomena in qualitative perspective. The paper tries to explore students problems and issues related to various academic disciplines such as Lecturer personal Characteristic, Lecturer Related and Student related activities. Under these categories different type of question ask from the student according to the student perspective. The study reports deficiencies of institutes and dissatisfaction of students in identified areas and urges the management in higher education to shift their focus on the most ignored dimensions of academic disciplines. The study also recommends the needed areas of future research and offers managerial implications.

KEYWORDS

Sri Lankan Universities, Management Faculty, Student Perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The paradigm shift in socio-economic change in all trades of human life, continuous innovation in science and technology, cultural diversity, and globalization has caused a similar shift in educational settings, particularly higher education (Barker, 1992). The static academic life in the countries like Sri Lanka has been shaken up and process of upbrining the educational system has been started. The deregulation of public enterprises specifically new entrants in higher education has created tough competition in the business of university management. In order to response to the consequences of this paradigm shift, which highlighted the deficiencies in the performance of public enterprises, governments introduced free market and privatization in many sectors including universities (Sharma & Lawrence, 2002). This movement has resulted in upsurge of academic culture in higher education, offered a competitive environment and demanded reengineering of systems and processes such as employment of total quality management (TQM) and balanced scorecard (BSC) in universities. The nature of university has been altogether changed into a commercial business, revenue led performance and customer dependent education and services. The pursuit of business-like efficiency and effectiveness calls for a representation of academic operations in the appropriate economic terms i.e. an emphasis on academic capitalism treating students as customers and education as product. Quoting Powell (1995) they argue that TQM was adopted by organizations with the intention of profit through a customer orientation improving market share and competitiveness. They proceed forward that the BSC approach to performance measurement as articulated by Kaplan and Norton (1993), has gained enormous prominence in mainstream management accounting research. Kaplan and Norton's BSC suggests that apart from financial measures of performance, attention needs to be paid to the requirements of customers, business processes and longer-term sustainability.

The universities are perceived as change leader in the modern world, where they construct the ideology of nations and direct the future of local community. The universities are supposed to be the home of policy advises and guidance for the political, social and economic progress. In the case of Sri Lanka, the role of universities is adverse, where they are being forced to adopt the advancements of new world. The universities are left with no choice, but to accommodate the upcoming changes around in the respective environment. What sorts of changes are demanded? Is the question, needs to be answered through a comprehensive investigation. This study is conducted to explore the major issues and problems in higher education in the perspective of students of public sector universities in Sri Lanka. The research covers the areas like Lecturer personal Characteristic, Lecturer Related and Student related activities. The findings of study may help the management of universities to focus on identified areas, upgrade their processes and meet the requirements of their students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 GENERAL ISSUES IN THE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Becket & Brookes (2006) describe that within the UK there are particular environmental forces imposing the need for effective quality management within university programs. These include a growing climate of accountability; an expansion in the size of student populations; an increasingly diverse student population resulting from widening participation initiatives and targeting international markets; diminishing resources with which to deliver programs of study; the increasingly competitive nature of higher education; greater expectations of students as paying customers; more flexible provision at both undergraduate and postgraduate level; and an increase in collaborative provision between institutions.

This changed scenario gives high emphasis to students and being customers, they are the key factors in shaping school outcomes and educational productivity (Levin, 1993). At most of the universities these days, students evaluate the performance of their teachers. At this point, however, the commodification of education depicts the problematic aspect of this change. Many researches (Goldverg & Callahan, 1991; Simpson & Siguwaw, 2000; Eiszler, 2002; Centra, 2003; and Olds & Crumbley, 2003) provide significant relationship found between the evaluation of university teachers by their students and inflated grades awarded to students by such teachers. Cavanaugh (2006) provides most summarized account of the problems caused by visiting teachers.

But Carrier, et al. (2000) pointing out students' problems describe that in a constructivist perspective, student learning problems, such as those identified by faculty members on the four campuses of the University of Minnesota, stem in part from students' sense that their coursework is largely removed from their central experiences, and thus, is neither easily assailable nor engaging. Furthermore, learning activities often conflict with activities or aspirations that they regard as more salient, such as their paid work or the everyday demands of their communities. They describe that on the campuses of most public universities, many students lack effective strategies for learning and, in some cases, have poor preparation in the skills and background knowledge needed for success in higher education. The literature on student learning problems shows that motivational and skill deficits make reading, study, and other coursework effortful and frustrating and those students often give these activities lower priority as a result. By referring to Gillani (2000) they conclude that constructivist-inspired interventions emphasize re-examining student-centered choices in teaching and learning that "place students' needs at the heart of the design process and take their backgrounds into consideration".

Problems are manifold. Some researches (Brookfield, 1990; Mukhtar, 2001; Rasheed, 2003; Isani & Virk, 2003; and Nisar, 2003) describe the following problems that most of the university students face:

i. Classroom Problems

The shortage of teaching staff, extra responsibilities with teaching a large number of students in class, unpleasant environment for teaching, non-availability of teaching aids, unawareness of teachers from learning experiences of students and uninterested/irrelevant studies are classroom problems faced by university teachers.

ii. Administrative Problems

These problems are basically related to administration. Misuse of administrative power of officer's and promotion of teachers make the university students suffer.

iii. Economic Problems

Teachers are mostly low-paid employees and same is true for university teachers as regard the demand of work expected of them. Similarly university teachers face residence and related problems which cause low or dissatisfaction among them. They can not teach well causing a decrease in the standard of education.

iv. Social Problems

Social problems of teachers affect the quality of teaching. Teachers' position in society and their relations with community, colleagues and administrator affect the teaching process.

Why such problems are important to be discussed? The university students are at terminal stage of their academic career after which they are to enter the most dynamic field of economic endeavor. But, if a graduate wonders who he is and where he does fit in this dynamic world (Malik, 2004). The preparation of these students for practical field according to the market demand makes the job of university teachers more and more challenging to ensure the recommended standards of quality education the world over. To educate students according to the market demand, Crawford (2004) points out the most urgently needed characteristic as, "the development of a student's ability to think clearly, logically and honestly is far greater value than the development of his/her memories, and that it should underlie all the teaching and learning. He or she will need capable staff who are able to teach in a way which develops thinking skills of their students" (p.25).

Jiwani (2004), while commenting on the problem-based learning, concludes that it will stimulate students' critical thinking skills and encourage independent learning, something that our system of higher education badly needs. To promote clear and critical thinking skills in students, the teacher him/herself needs to be very much clear in his/her capabilities, duties and responsibilities.

In July 1999, Dr. Lorie Roth, Senior Director of Academic Services & Professional Development, California State University, described the following areas of major concern in a report "Faculty Development at Armstrong Atlantic State University 1998- 999" regarding issues and problems of students in higher education as: Meeting the Unprecedented Need for New Faculty in Higher Education

- a. Unprecedented Retirements: In order to respond high projections regarding students' population in future and growing number of faculty retirements, an ever increasing number of new faculty is required at universities. Obviously, the need to train and develop the new faculty is ever increasing.
- b. Lack of Diversity: Recruitment of diverse faculty is another major challenge universities are facing. This lacking diversity among the newly selected graduates demands their development as diversified teachers.
- c. Ability to Attract and Retain Quality Faculty: Universities are facing problems to attract and retain quality faculty especially in public sector because of salaries lower than the high costs of living.

Therefore, the faculty hired whatsoever, needs to be developed to fulfill the challenges of the modern age. Improving Teaching Quality and Student learning at Colleges and Universities

- a. Instructional Quality: universities have as their core responsibility the provision of comprehensive and high quality educational experiences that optimize student learning. Instructional quality is key to meeting this responsibility. Essential in this regard is faculty knowledge and understanding about instructional processes, the design and development of curriculum, the assessment of learning, and the identification of student needs. Further, faculty knowledge about teaching and learning in diverse classrooms and the appropriate integration of technology into teaching and the curriculum are critically important to the achievement of all students.
- b. Systematic Campus-wide Change: There is a need for new strategies that address systemic and cultural issues within the institution and, at the same time, provide "structural invitations and incentives" for faculty to participate efforts to improve teaching and learning.
- c. Local Context and Factions: Policies and strategies must be suited to local contexts and specific segments of the community. Within this context, modifying doctoral and master's programs will facilitate change to place increased emphasis on developing knowledge and skill in teaching in the disciplines, thus having an impact on the teaching-related sophistication among new hires.

2.2. SRI LANKAN UNIVERSITY QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

The University Grants Commission (UGC) was established under the Universities Act. No.16 of 1978. The functions of the UGC are to allocate funds to the universities and university institutes, serve as the central admission agency for undergraduate studies in universities, planning and monitoring of academic activities of the university system in order to maintain academic standards and implement national policies in respect of university education. There were 31 higher educational institutes are operating under UGC (it included 15 universities, 7 post graduate institutes and 9 other institutes). The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAA) was established under UGC and it look after all academic issues and development of the entire higher education system.

The QAA council has "Responsibility for quality and standards can only lie effectively where the powers to control or change practices exist, that is, with the institution itself - not with an external body" Universities are public institutions. They hold and must conscientiously exercise, and be seen to exercise, their responsibility for quality and standards. Higher education is a 'public good' and is of crucial importance to the health, wealth and well being of society and the economy in Sri Lanka. University accountability for quality and standards is a key factor in promoting and safeguarding public confidence in Sri Lankan higher education and those standards are help to minimize most of the exiting problems in entire university system.

The following general principles apply to the quality assurance procedures adopted for the purpose of institutional and subject review in Sri Lanka:

1. To safeguard the standards of awards and the quality of delivery of academic programmes in Sri Lanka
2. To encourage good management of academic institutions.
3. To identify and share good practice in the provision of education
4. To develop a national quality assurance system in Sri Lanka that combines institutional review (quality, standards and management), with subject level review
5. To implement procedures that is based on academic peer review combined with strong administrative support at national and institutional level
6. To provide sufficient funds nationally to cover the central costs of the quality assurance system, including the payment of academic reviewers and a central administrative team and perhaps providing earmarked funding to support quality assurance in individual universities/institutions
7. To enable funding judgments to be taken on the basis of the outcomes of reviews
8. To recruit a national team of academic reviewers, all of whom will receive training for institutional and subject review
9. To implement the system in such a way as to make use of existing structures, documents and other materials wherever possible, rather than to introduce additional bureaucracy

2.3 COMPONENTS OF NATIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM

Within the national quality assurance system, the Committee on Quality Assurance has agreed that the following components of each institution's provision will be reviewed:

The nation also has very high expectations from the teachers of universities as they are considered to be responsible for the provision of high quality manpower for the development of the country. But these quantitative achievements at university level, showing very high degree of government interest, hide serious qualitative deficiencies (Haq, 1987, given in Haq, and Kirdar, 1988) and national expectations are not being realized.

"Most of the candidates lacked the ability to express their views or discuss the subjects with clarity and logic. The candidates were generally poor in English and gave the impression as if they were using the language for expression for the first time. A good number of candidates presented themselves before the

commission without proper preparation. They showed casual attitude and gave the impression that they had come to the Commission to take a chance for better prospects. They did not exhibit the aptitude or the ability to achieve it. Most of the candidates gave the impression that they had not studied relevant syllabus of their subjects but had managed to secure their degrees through the made easy guides and notes. They did not exhibit the knowledge about the subject of their studies and their knowledge remained shallow and superficial”.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

All students of the public universities in Sri Lanka built the population where as one public university was included in the sample. Only undergraduate students in different degree programme and different level were selected for this study. A 18-item self-made questionnaire was piloted and administered, by the researchers personally, which was found valid and reliable with 0.82 Chronbach Alpha. As the questionnaire was constructed on 5-point Lickert Scale, response options were quantified as Extra Satisfaction (1); Satisfaction (2); Average (3); Un satisfaction (4); and Extra Un satisfaction (5). Mean Scores for every individual item and Average Mean Score for every individual area and an overall Average Mean Score of all areas were calculated using SPSS.

3.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To identify the possible problems in Sri Lankan university system. Specially in degree programme.
2. To evaluate most important problems in the university system in the teaching and learning process.
3. To give the realistic solutions to overcome problems

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study makes a fruitful addition in literature by identifying the shortcomings in university education as perceived by students. The estimate is composed of private and public universities and administered in Sri Lanka. Therefore selected one of the best samples, which represent the population of management faculty in Rajarata University undergraduate and ensure the generalizing validity. In terms of quantities analysis (table 4.1), the results could be surmised as: a) Lecturer's personal characteristic (LPC) segment, the average mean score is 4.73. b) Lecturer Related (LR) segment the average mean score is 4.29. c) Student Related (SR) takes an average mean score of 4.35. The identified shortcomings in the universities in descending scale of high rated shortcomings (HRS) and low rated shortcomings (LRS). The problems and issues of universities in terms of their shortcomings in the Lecturer's personal characteristic. The statistics show that category of LPC variable includes; 1) Punctuality of the Lecturer, 2) Explicitly of the Lecturer, 3) Equity of the Lecturer, 4) Rooms for personal contract with students. In the bracket of LR variable fall as: 1) Evidence of preparation for the lecturer , 2) Starting the lecture with summary of previous topic , 3) ability to grasp the content of the lecture , 4) Speed of the delivery , 5) Explanation and Example , 6) Reference given, 7) Legibility of the letter of the lecturer and 8) Use of the audio visual. The problems and issues regarding teaching facilities provided by the universities The SR includes 1) ability to write down note 2) Adequacy of tutorials and handouts, 3) interest on the lecture series 4) Overall knowledge improvement 5) Awareness of the syllabi 6) Awareness of Evaluation procedure. The qualitative analysis is derived from the focus group of public universities in Sri Lanka. In summer the focus groups reveals the following points (table 4.2):

- a. Kind of evaluation should follow on the beginning of the lecture series. Not at the end.
- b. Student contact hours should increase.
- c. Speed of delivery is common mistake.
- d. A large number (students could not quantify) of university teachers are not friendly with students.
- e. University teachers are not role-model for students as they fail to maintain a high standard in their external appearance, communication, interpersonal relationship, unbiased behavior, and humanism.
- f. There are no appropriate arrangements in the universities for the personality development of students owing to the indifferent faculty attitude toward this highly desired task.
- g. Insufficient teaching material and audio visual like Multimedia, handouts etc.

TABLE 4.1 – MEAN VALUES FOR EACH AREA

| | Mean | Average Mean |
|---|------|--------------|
| Lecturer's Personal Characteristics | | 4.73 |
| Punctuality of the lecturer | 4.89 | |
| Explicitly of the lecturer | 4.74 | |
| Equity of the lecturer | 4.69 | |
| Rooms for personal contract with students | 4.60 | |
| Lecturer Related | | 4.29 |
| Evidence of preparation for the lecturer | 4.61 | |
| Starting the lecture with summary of previous topic | 4.21 | |
| Ability to grasp the content of the lecture | 4.32 | |
| Speed of the delivery | 4.00 | |
| Explanation and Example | 4.50 | |
| Reference given | 4.36 | |
| Legibility of the letter of the lecturer | 4.25 | |
| Use of the audio visual | 4.10 | |
| Student Related | | 4.35 |
| Ability to write down note | 4.13 | |
| Adequacy of tutorials and handouts | 4.43 | |
| Interest on the lecture series | 4.57 | |
| Overall knowledge improvement | 4.29 | |
| Awareness of the syllabi | 4.32 | |
| Awareness of Evaluation procedure | 4.35 | |
| Overall Mean Value | | 4.41 |

TABLE 4.2 – MEAN VALUES FOR EACH AREA (HIGHEST AND LOWEST)

| | Highest Mean | Lowest Mean |
|---|--------------|-------------|
| Lecturer's Personal Characteristics - (4.73) | | |
| Punctuality of the lecturer | 4.89 | |
| Explicitly of the lecturer | 4.74 | |
| Equity of the lecturer | | 4.69 |
| Rooms for personal contract with students | | 4.60 |
| Lecturer Related – (4.29) | | |
| Evidence of preparation for the lecturer | 4.61 | |
| Starting the lecture with summary of previous topic | | 4.21 |
| Ability to grasp the content of the lecture | 4.32 | |
| Speed of the delivery | | 4.00 |
| Explanation and Example | 4.50 | |
| Reference given | 4.36 | |
| Legibility of the letter of the lecturer | | 4.25 |
| Use of the audio visual | | 4.10 |
| Student Related – (4.35) | | |
| Ability to write down note | | 4.13 |
| Adequacy of tutorials and handouts | 4.43 | |
| Interest on the lecture series | 4.57 | |
| Overall knowledge improvement | | 4.29 |
| Awareness of the syllabi | | 4.32 |
| Awareness of Evaluation procedure | 4.35 | |

5. CONCLUSION

The study investigates the problems and issues of students of public sector universities, taking the case of Sri Lanka. The data was collected on survey instrument of 18 items, validated and administered in one university with 100 useful questionnaires. The teaching is primary product of universities, delivered through resource person and play prominent role in determining the quality of education. In the concern of teaching quality in universities, the highly ranked shortcomings are 1) provisioning of course outlines, 2) updated content knowledge, 3) on campus availability of teachers, 4) friendly with students, 5) encouraging participation of students. The universities should pay their attention to improve these areas, which is basically neglected by the management. The management of universities is responsible to provide academic support facilities that assist the teachers and students in learning and teaching process. In the case of teaching facilities, universities are ignoring their highly graded shortcomings like 1) availability of multimedia, 2) overhead projector, 3) on-campus access to Internet, 4) field studies and seminars and 5) on-campus lab facilities. The negligence in providing educational support material hinders the quality of education lower the overall learning outcome rate. The universities should design their course contents in a way, which primarily cater the identified shortcomings of students.

6. LIMITATION OF THE STUDY

Study limited to Management Faculty in Rajarata University.

7. FURTHER RESEARCH

This study is limited to one (01) university out of fifteen (15) universities and selected only the management faculty. Consist of the university or other similar institution there were several functions and operations, in addition to there were many supporting services which included in the process, such as library, student services, establishment unit, maintenance, medical centers, physical education, computer center., English language unit, carries guidance, cultural center, examination unit, audit branch, postal unit, payment branch, supply branch, each faculty functions ,other than the registrar and vice chancellor office activities. In the hierarchy on university, academic as well as nonacademic activities were occurred. These were covered all university activities, in future there will be a approach to conducted research on each faculty level as well as corporate level to evaluate the performance in university.

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