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The Need to Retrieve an Abandoned Value in Higher Education – Intellectual Integrity

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Abstract

There is a specific dimension of the current crisis of higher education in Sri Lanka, namely, the displacement of cultures of academic and intellectual integrity by dishonest and fraudulent practices in research and publication. This is also part of a global trend, facilitated by neo-liberalization of universities and the commodification of production and dissemination of scientific knowledge in all fields of inquiry. The way in which this trend has entered Sri Lanka's academic cultures will be illustrated in this talk primarily by anecdotal evidence I have encountered as a senior member of the university academic community. I highlight the issues of predatory publishing, lack of sensitivity to ethics of research and academic writing, fraudulent practices resorted to in securing promotions in academic positions, and the institutional complicity of the universities, the UGC, and senior academic administrators in taking part in and sustaining this culture of academic dishonesty. The talk also draws special attention to the continuing crisis of expanding post-graduate education in Sri Lankan universities, marked the lack of recognition of the poor quality and standards of postgraduate teaching, learning, training, research, supervision, and assessment.

The talk will end with two proposals for action for consideration: (a) taking immediate steps to raise the quality and standards of all aspects of post-graduate education, training, and research, and (b) introducing Research/Publication Ethics and Intellectual Integrity as a short module in the Staff Development Centre programmes of all universities.

Key Words: *Higher education, academic culture, intellectual integrity, dishonest academic practices.*

In my talk today, I want to draw your attention to one specific dimension of what we all conceptualize as the crisis of higher education in Sri Lanka. It is about the

displacement of cultures of academic and intellectual integrity by practices that needs to be described as dishonest and fraudulent in research and publication. And this is also part of a global trend of intellectual decay, facilitated by neo-liberalization of universities and the commodification of production and dissemination of scientific knowledge in all fields of inquiry. Its corroding impact on Sri Lanka's higher education has already become institutionalized. Yet it still remains unacknowledged in our circles. The purpose of my talk is to warn all of you about this theme and urge you to fight it.

At the outset, I want to share with you a report which appeared in the prestigious Indian newspaper, *The Hindu*, on last Sunday, (July 21, 2019). The caption of the report was, 'Russian Website Carrying 'Paid' Research Authorship Probed.' Its story was about a new "online market place" for research authorship. What this service offers, according to the London-based Web of Science, is selling finished articles to authors for publication in Scopus and Web of Science journals.

The Hindu report goes on to say that the Russian website's practice is to "ask researchers to part with hundreds of dollars to become authors of papers that they never worked on, promising definite publication and indexing."

The Website has also listed 344 articles for which first, second, third or more authorships are for sale. Of the 344 papers where authorships are for sale, 73 are from journals based in India. Venezuela has the second highest number of papers at 54, followed by the U.S. (38), Russia (33) and Pakistan (28).

The purchasing of authorship of scientific research articles of course entails a considerable cost. According the Hindu report, the cost of first authorship is the highest. The cost gets reduced for the successive authors. The cost of first authorship varies from \$285 to \$1,222.

What kind of news would this be for the colleagues in our university system who are preparing their applications for professorial promotions? I raise this issue before a scholarly audience like you with a sense of sadness. I am sensitive to the fact that a fairly good number of our university teachers from all Faculties have succumbed to the temptation of publishing in predatory journals to qualify themselves for appointments as well as promotions to professorial grades. We will get the exact figures when Professor Jayatissa of University of Ruhuna publishes his paper on fake research. His preliminary data shows that in one specific university, the Faculty of Commerce and Management staff have 94% of their publications in fake journals. Agriculture and medicine come second and third with percentages of 58 and 43 respectively. Then come Arts and Science Faculties with 32% and 18 %. The low rate of some Faculties may be attributed to the lack of proficiency in the English language and disinterest in publishing.

Until we can see Professor Jayatissa's complete data, let me share with you a few minor anecdotes to show how we have developed a university sub - culture in which norms of scholarly rigour, personal and professional integrity as well as intellectual honesty have been suspended, if not abandoned. Methodologically, anecdotal evidence is useful to construct inferences and hypotheses that can propose research programmes. They are also helpful to get a sense of new trends and patterns of things happening in society.

In each of the anecdotal episodes that I will share with you, I have been a member of the selection committee. They all have suggested to me that universities as we have known them until a few years ago are not in existence any longer in our country. It is no exaggeration to say that our universities have been taken over by a new generation of academics who do not seem to even know that once upon a time there has been a tradition in which 'intellectual integrity' was a much - valued academic virtue. It is very depressing to realize that when you begin to talk with them about virtues such as research and publication ethics, you get either a blank face with no response, or a sarcastic smile.

My first anecdote relates to a selection committee meeting for the appointment of a senior lecturer. The candidate had submitted a few "international" publications in English as evidence of his/her research and publication record. The titles of these journals quickly revealed their predatory identity. I, as I usually do such meetings, quickly glanced through the articles. I could find spelling and grammatical mistakes in the language, inconsistencies in the bibliographical format, and several other indications that these articles, although they had academic merit, had not been peer reviewed or revised after a proper refereeing exercise. I asked the candidate, who appeared to be a young scholar with a promising future, how easy or difficult it was to get these articles published in 'international' journals. Swift came the answer, which actually surprised me: "Very difficult, Sir. I had to pay Rs, 25, 000 for each paper." In this particular example, the difficulty is not about the burden of revising the papers to meet the rigorous scientific standards as demanded by the journal and its anonymous reviewers, but about finding money for their publication in fake journals.

In my second example, there was a candidate who had submitted for evaluation more than 20 journal articles under Section 2. 1 of the Marking Scheme. The candidate had claimed that they have been published in peer reviewed and indexed journals. Before I went for the Selection Committee meeting, I did a little bit of research and found that more than half of these journals were predatory journals. I asked the candidate pointing to one such article how much was paid to get it published. The answer did not surprise me. The fee was US dollars 450. Then I commented that the candidate might have had to spend quite a lot of money in foreign exchange to get so many articles in those journals. The answer was "No sir, the university where I did my Ph. D research paid for them. They have a fund to help the staff to publish their research in international journals."

This answer reveals a recent malaise that has gripped our state universities. It is the 'mad rush to improve the university ranking' by hook or crook. This particular candidate had been a doctoral student from a Sri Lankan university. The candidate now teaches at another Sri Lankan university. The co-authors of all those articles were from that university which had a publication fund. Most of that money -- I won't be surprised if an audit is conducted would reveal this -- have gone to the bank accounts of unscrupulous individuals who run the so -- called peer-reviewed and indexed on-line journal scams, with no postal address or institutional location. Even if an institution is given, its name has to begin with the prefix 'global' or 'international', and of course a bogus entity.

My third example is about our senior academics who evaluate material submitted for promotions by professorial candidates and thus award marks. I will share with you just one dramatic instance. The professorial candidate in this example had been awarded marks quite generously for the material submitted for evaluation by the subject experts. The latter had treated them as genuine articles published in peer-reviewed and indexed journals. I had a quick look at those journal articles and found that they were as good as unsupervised first year undergraduate tutorials. None of the articles had evidence that they were based on systematic, or supervised, scholarly research. They were like weekend newspaper articles translated into poor English, with haphazard footnotes and shoddy bibliographies. All the articles were full of errors in language, grammar, and spelling. Errors in spelling of very famous individuals were distressingly frequent. Sri Lanka's own S. W. R. D. Bandaranaike and J. R. Jayewardene were victims of careless spelling of their names. In one article which was claimed to have been peer reviewed by an international editorial team of subject experts, Karl Marx was spelt twice as Carl Marks. The bibliographies were repeatedly wrong in format, content and spelling, indicating that this professorial candidate had not really had the basic training in the elementary aspects of academic writing even as an undergraduate. Although members of the high-powered selection committee were seemingly embarrassed, they thought that they were powerless to do anything beyond rubber-stamping the faulty evaluations done by irresponsible 'subject experts.'

Now, the point is that the external evaluators, who themselves are, or have been, senior professors in the system had given adequate marks to this blatantly substandard material for the candidate to qualify for a professorial position in one of our premier universities, along with recommendations for the promotion. Little did they seem to have thought that they themselves were participating, willingly and happily, in an unashamed academic fraud.

In this particular case too, I don't blame the candidate alone who submitted substandard publications as evidence of his/her suitability to become a full professor. I blame the academic sub-culture of intellectual decadence that has become dominant,

and threatening to be pervasive, in our universities, with the active participation of senior academics, some of whom have held, or hold at present, or will come to hold after much awaited regime change, very responsible positions in the hierarchy of university administration.

My fourth example is about post-graduate supervision. Recently I examined a doctoral dissertation in the social science field. The candidate has had the privilege of being advised and guided by two supervisors, both being senior academics in our university system. Both supervisors had signed and certified the dissertation to be suitable for submission and examination. I started reading the dissertation only to realize from the Forward onwards that none of the pages of the work had been subjected to critical scrutiny by the supervisors. Almost every paragraph, every page and every chapter was full of errors, deficiencies, and infirmities. There was no indication whatsoever that this candidate had been given any serious training in research, academic analysis or writing in the course of post-graduate training s/he had received. Worst still, there was no evidence of supervisors having read with serious intent the draft chapters, or the initial versions, of the dissertation before they gave their consent in a signed page attached to the dissertation for its submission. Let me also say that, at the risk of antagonizing quite a number of my own friends, that this sub-standard doctoral dissertation is a product of the new FGS (Faculties of Graduate Studies) culture of intellectual decay that has swept almost all our state universities.

I do not blame either the candidate or the two supervisors alone. I blame the dominant academic sub-culture which produces (a) such supervisors, (b) such post-graduate students who do not develop the capacity to differentiate between an undergraduate tutorial and the chapter of a doctoral dissertation, and (c) Faculties and Departments that take nonsense to be science, particularly the latter's social and management/commerce variants.

Now, let me analyze these four anecdotes. In the first one, we have a young scholar who aspired to be a university academic. In order to guarantee his/her chances of getting an academic position in a university, s/he got a few articles published in those open access online journals. S/he is probably too young to realize that scholarly articles as well as books and book chapters are usually peer-reviewed, revised and carefully edited before they are published. Similarly, it is probably the case that the traditions of research and publication in the Sri Lankan university where he studied, as well as all Sri Lankan universities, are such that they have abandoned universally accepted norms and practices of academic research and publication. S/he had thought that publishing in fraudulent journals would qualify him/her to enter the hallowed corridors of the Sri Lankan academia. My guess is that there are so many young men and women who have fallen victim to this fake academic sub-culture of our universities which promote fraud as science.

In the second anecdote, a university's academic leaders themselves have by design and consciously promoted and engaged themselves in creating and legitimizing a fake academic sub-culture by financing a racket-like initiative for publishing raw research papers in predatory journals. Why have they done so? There can be several answers to this question. One reason I speculate, which I would like to bring to your attention again, is the mad rush to upgrading university ranking, a malaise that began to strike our universities and their Vice-Chancellors several years ago. This is where we can see the link between the recent emergence of fraudulent academic cultures and the global trend of neo-liberalizing the public universities. Neo-liberal measures of success rest on two principles: (a) you have to pay for your success, and the end justified the means, and (ii) success should be quantifiable and measurable, and what matters is not necessarily the quality, standards and normative considerations of your work or value framework of your conduct, but quantity and measurability of the building-blocks of your path to success.

The moral of the third anecdote implicates senior members of our university academic community who function as external evaluators or subject experts and members of selection committees for professorial promotions, Deans of Faculties, University Senate and Council members, and finally the UGC. When candidates with no moral qualms about making false claims in the promotion applications about the material they have submitted for evaluation for their professorial promotions, the Senate appointed evaluators are duty bound to scrutinize those claims professionally, diligently and honestly. When they fail in this basic duty, what they actually do is recommending unqualified, ill-qualified, undeserved academics who have already indulged in fraudulent practices in the application process, to be leaders of our universities. When even a few of such recommendations are endorsed by selection committees, vice-chancellors, and university councils, often by hiding behind those deliberate loopholes in the promotion circulars issued by the previous heads of the UGC, it threatens the very survival of our entire system of higher education. Actually, this process of institutional collapse of our public universities has already begun. The significant salary increase that the FUTA struggle managed to secure for the university teachers has not contributed much to arrest this trend. Paradoxically, it has served a contrary objective. It has accelerated the race for professorial promotions with fake evidence of intellectual accomplishment.

The fourth anecdote symbolizes the tip of a volcano which is about to erupt. It can be taken as an urgent wake up call as well. Let me elaborate this point a little longer than the previous three. It encapsulates a massive anomaly with which our state university system is caught up. Our universities continue to remain undergraduate colleges built according to the model conceived by Sir Ivor Jennings in the early 1940s when the University of Ceylon was established. Since the 1980s, our universities began to expand post-graduate education in response to the social demand for those qualifications. To give you a sense of the phenomenal expansion of post-graduate education, let me share with you some background information and a few statistics.

The total number of post-graduates produced by Sri Lanka's state universities in the year 2016 was 7, 307. Out of them, 350 were research degrees at M. Phil and Ph. D level. As the UGC data for the year 2017 shows, the postgraduate output has now reached over a quarter of the total number of university outputs. For the year 2017, the total undergraduate output from state universities was 26,015 (72%) and the postgraduate output was 10,121 (28%), the latter constituting over a quarter of the number of the undergraduates passed out from the state universities.

The data also shows some noticeable trends in the numbers engaged in postgraduate education. Four established universities in the metropolis dominate the field. Universities of Colombo, Kelaniya, Peradeniya and Sri Jayewardenapura are placed in the top of the numerical order of domination. In the national total, the demand for Post-Graduate Diploma and Masters Degrees is quite high. The numbers graduated in 2017 show that there were 1791 PG Diplomas and a still higher number of 4868 Masters degrees. For advanced research degrees, the numbers are not too low, with 341 M. Phils and 454 Ph. Ds and MDs. It is in a way astonishing that the Sri Lankan state universities have produced 454 doctoral outputs in the year 2017.

What is this particular anomaly which our university system is confronted with at present? We have a phenomenal expansion of post-graduate programmes and students without the universities being subjected to any structural reforms, infrastructure development and human resource capacity building. Over 10, 000 postgraduate students are enrolled into a system of higher education that is fundamentally ill-equipped to handle such highly demanding programmes of education, research and training. University professors who have been teaching undergraduate courses for decades and actually drudge as fulltime undergraduate teachers are now called upon to train M.Phil. and Ph. D students part time, on weekends. Our post-graduate students are part time scholars who come to classes on Friday evenings and, Saturdays, and half Sundays. When we have senior academics who have not got a single publication in a properly refereed, indexed and respectable academic journal of international recognition or a book chapter in a properly reviewed and edited volume and therefore not exposed to the rigours of scientific scholarship in research and writing, what training can they give to their M. Phil and PhD, D students? What guidance could their advisors, on whom much praise and adoration is heaped in the acknowledgement page of the thesis, could provide to those unsuspecting postgraduate students?

Now, this question takes me to my final point. It is about the lack of a place as well as a role for intellectual integrity from the professional and ethical

considerations of our university culture. When young and aspiring scholars believe that by publishing in fake and fraudulent journals, they can get academic positions in our universities, what difference does it make between them and our religious-minded and pious urban citizens who begin their day by stealing flowers to offer at the shrine room from their neighbors' garden early in the morning? It is not an ethical dilemma for them because the idea of integrity and honesty is absent in both instances. When a university itself legitimizes, finances and promotes a fraudulent academic activity, can the community of that university entertain any notion of personal, professional and institutional integrity? When professorial Selection Committees refuse to subject to critical scrutiny the material that comes before it as credentials for professorial promotions, what culture of academic honesty are we talking about? When Deans and Vice Chancellors use academic career promotions of their colleagues as mechanisms to promote their own patronage networks and improve their chances of re-election in office for the second time, what example do they set for the others who are in the system? When university lecturers applying for promotions for professorial positions, their evaluators, their university Senates and Councils, and ultimately the UGC are accomplices to a grave academic crime, how can our universities survive with any sense of responsibility to society?

In the scam-prone academic culture of our universities, the latest is the racket called Sri Lanka Education Leadership Awards to best professors, best Deans etc. This year's awards ceremony has probably been held on July 17 at Taj Samudra Hotel in Colombo. I understand that the conmen who organize this event give away awards to academics after a payment of US dollars 150 as a fee. I have also learnt that a number of senior academics in our universities have been recipients of this bogus award in the recent past. They even proudly display this dubious honour in their CVs! Is there any lower depth for an academic, with any sense of professional self-respect, to fall into? Well, perhaps little do they know that by bragging about these fraudulent honours, these senior academics – 'best professors', 'best Deans', and 'best researchers' -- only name and shame themselves in public!

Let me conclude by merely saying the following: if our universities are to survive as legitimate public institutions that are worth supported by money extracted from poor citizens by various devious forms of indirect taxation, a serious conversation about academic, intellectual, professional and intellectual integrity has to begin, and begin immediately.

If the name of Sri Lanka Association for Improving Higher Education Effectiveness has any meaning to its members, this should be the forum for such a conversation to begin. My plea is for you to take the recovery of academic and intellectual integrity as the normative goal of your agenda.

Before I conclude, let me propose two ideas for consideration during your deliberations today. Just think about the amount of money our academics have paid to the fake journals and the Lambert publishing company to get their papers and book manuscripts published. Then, you will realize that that money could have been pooled into a fund at each university and used to support existing university journals, by raising them to the standards of truly international journals, with proper protocol for peer reviewing and indexing, editing etc. When we look at the sheer volume of papers published in those fake journals every year by Sri Lankan academics, we cannot complain that there is a shortage of material to sustain journals.

As I showed you a little while ago, we have a few hundred Ph. D candidates passing out every year. Make it compulsory for M. Phi and Ph. D candidates to publish a minimum number of articles in peer - reviewed journals as a pre-condition for their research degrees. With such a dramatic expansion of post-graduate candidates across all our universities, it is preposterous to say that people don't send quality articles for journals for publication. If our post - graduate scholars don't write publishable research articles with academic quality and merit, that provides everyday evidence of extremely poor quality and standards of our post-graduate programmes. Once we have at least five properly peer-reviewed high quality scientific journals, run professionally, and as quarterlies, to international standards, it will have a positive and rejuvenating effect on our cultures of scientific research, academic writing, refereeing, editing, publishing, and of course, reading. Initially, such an endeavor needs financial support from the UGC and the universities. More than that, it requires a core group of honest people with selfless commitment. I am hopeful that you have a plenty of such people among members of your Association.

My second proposal to you is to consider introducing Research/Publication Ethics and Intellectual Integrity as a short module in your SDC programmes. Let the young academics who come to your Staff Development Centres for professional training know that in the universities too, there is something called professionalism, professional ethics and professional integrity. Let them also be aware that their professional conduct should be governed by ethics, values and norms specific to the vocation called 'the pursuit of truths and knowledge.' That is one way to make even a belated attempt to arrest the impending institutional collapse of our public universities in this country.

Thank you.

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