

Keynote Address: Professor Hemamalie Gunathilaka, SLAIHEE annual conference, 25 July 2025

On the CONFERENCE THEME: “Helping educators and students reduce and manage performance anxieties”

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen!

First, I wish to thank the organising committee of SLAIHEE conference. It is a great honour to be here as a member of SLAIHEE, as well as an accredited teacher in higher education. Thank you very much for inviting me to this conference and to deliver the keynote speech.

Today's theme for your conference is “Helping educators, and students reduce and manage performance anxieties”. We will now look at what anxiety is. It is often seen in a negative connotation, so it is kind of an emotion that students or may be, as teachers experience when we are worried about a failure. And a fear that we are not able to achieve what we intend to achieve. So, when it comes to anxiety, stress cannot be kept aside, because they go hand in hand. Therefore, stress is a demand placed on your brain. We all have gone through stress, and we all know what stress means. You feel frustrated or nervous when you feel stressed. If stress and anxiety are unmanaged, then it will interfere your daily lives, it will affect negatively to your mental health as well as to your physical health. And when it comes to a teacher getting stressed or anxious, it affects the students as well.

When looking at anxiety, even though mainly we look at it in a negative sense, we also can come up with a positive connotation, as well, that is productive anxiety. What do you mean by productive anxiety? It is the healthy level of anxiety that we can maintain. So, if we can manage anxiety and stress as well, then we are able to make use of it as something that is positive or productive.

Even when teaching stress, we say that there is the optimal level of stress up to which productivity increases, our performance can be maximised, but if we do not manage, it starts reducing afterwards, so even anxiety is the same. If we do not manage, then it will after a certain point, start giving us negative consequences. So, when it comes to managing anxiety or maintaining the anxiety and stress it says that you can do it, but you need to develop certain skills or you need to improve yourselves, you just cannot do it by waiting, but you need to have some sort of a way of developing coping mechanisms within you to deal with the anxiety and stress and gradually improving the same so that even if you are in stress and anxiety, you are able to take the maximum

out of it. Therefore, we must not always look at stress and anxiety in a negative sense, but we must look at them as a way of improving or doing the best in ourselves.

Having said that, when it comes to anxiety and stress, we all as individuals, experience anxiety and stress. Maybe teachers, maybe students anyone who is an individual, a human being is the one who experiences stress and anxiety. Then who is an individual or a human being? We all know we have a physical body. And we have a conscious mind through which we perceive the world, and we make decisions, and we develop a wide range of emotions and go through many experiences. Human is a resource and when you take resources, human resource is the one and only resource that can feel, think and react, so that is why in organisations, we consider human resource as the most important resource that makes decisions on behalf of all the other resources. Now you can see the significance of managing stress and anxiety, because we are the ones who are making decisions. If we make wrong decisions it has impacts on every one of us.

Let us see next, why it is important to manage stress and anxiety and the significance of the theme that you all have selected for this year's conference. When it comes to individuals, we are all unique. So is our perception. We perceive the world that we sense through our five senses. We get inputs, we process them in the process of perceiving the world and we give meaning to the world. If we perceive things incorrectly, there'll be negative consequences, for example, if we get back to 2004 tsunami, as Sri Lankans, without knowing what tsunami is, we made incorrect decisions. However, other countries where they knew what the tsunami is, they perceived it differently and act accordingly. Likewise, we are unique when it comes to the way we understand the world, our personalities are unique. Our attitudes are unique, we have unique values, unique beliefs, unique assumptions and so on. Then how come we become unique?

It is mainly due to certain things like socialisation and DNA, which makes us individually different to each other. When we come to the world we get DNA. We have our genes in us that gives us kind of a unique identity and from the day one, we get nurtured through the socialisation process, each one of us starts understanding what is around us, how to behave, what to do what not to do and so on. This socialisation is different for each one of us. Therefore, how I got my socialisation is not the way that each one of you receive or got your socialisation. We start getting socialised from our family, that is the very first thing that we experience our parents and our siblings. You might say, if we are from one family, we have the same socialisation. But think of the eldest sibling and the youngest. it will be two different ways of a Socialisation, say, responsibilities are different for the in the elder one and the younger one and likewise. However,

socialisation is how we get to know the world and how we understand what we need to do what we need not to do, how to behave, and what are the misbehaviours.

Also, we are coming from diverse backgrounds. That's diversity, if we take gender, now, here we have men as well as women. There's diversity when it comes to ethnicity, we are diverse, in relation to ethnic identities and our religions, we are becoming different because of the religions, we are following. And also, nowadays we talk about sexual orientations. We are different in our sexual orientations, whether we come from rural or urban backgrounds, we are different, and our neural abilities make us different. And also, with the language that we speak, we are different, so all these differences develop you to be unique individuals. So why I am highlighting this uniqueness, because each unique individual feels anxiety and stress differently, so it is highly challenging for us.

We as teachers when we get into a class, such as the faculty of management, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, our class size is 150 to 200 plus. It means 200 plus unique individuals. Then how are we to cater the needs of these 400 eyes that are on us with different anxiety and stress levels, it's highly challenging. Adding to it, unique socialisation of individuals develops us as unique knowledge bases. That is another thing in a class. We have unique knowledge bases, all the students that we are teaching are unique knowledge bases. There are a few characters I have given in the slide. All these people may be a prisoner or a poet, he or she is having a unique knowledge base. So, we know now human libraries are gaining recognition because we learn from these different people where their knowledge is not written. Individuals are unique is what I want to highlight, and why they become unique, it is due to the socialisation and the different diversity bases that are present among us.

There are some research that had looked at where this anxiety is becoming different among individuals. One of the research highlights that when it comes to the genders, females having consistently higher anxiety than males. Although this is research finding I want to say that it depends on the context, not that this is applicable to every situation, it depends on the context, and we know there may be instances where men are more anxious than women. It depends on the context and then when it comes to anxiety, it's higher in freshmen in educational institutions than among seniors, and this finding is equally applicable to Sri Lanka. We know due to ragging freshers are highly anxious, but I am so sad to mention the fact that now it is not only the first years that are getting ragged.

Further, with the diversity, how anxiety become different, it says, underrepresented minorities have been studied in the context of stereotypes, we know with stereotypes people in invoking membership in a group with a negative stereotype have lower student performance compared with peers.

Then how are we to relate these to the theme of your conference today? I discussed about productive anxiety, so in learning, productive anxiety refers to the manageable level of anxiety that can enhance motivation and performance. While we say that we can go with anxiety and stress to a certain level, it is because your body is capable of absorbing and going along with stress and anxiety to a certain level, but it varies between individuals that is what is important to us.

Therefore, we have to see how we can manage anxiety, as well as stress and be at the optimal level without going further, where our performance is going down. We can manage anxiety with pre-planning. So, if we do not plan for example, getting prepared for a lecture. We know the difference between preparing for a lecture and going and delivering and not preparing and delivering. Thus, pre-planning is something that we can do to manage our anxiety and stress and also being reflective.

What I learned from Prof Ekaratne, who taught us to be reflective way back in 2001. His teaching gave me a lot of courage to become who I am today, still I reflect, after a lecture.

When you are reflective, then you know how to handle things even after a lecture, I remember you giving us a checklist to check what you have done and what you have not done in a lecture. With these practices gradually our anxieties get lower, because we know we are doing minimum mistakes in a class so we can manage our anxieties. In our day-to-day life, we can get advice from more competent people as how I got from Prof Ekaratne. All these things can make us become people who can manage anxiety and stress.

Teacher training, which is a real good thing for us to get to know how to manage anxiety and stress and also identify the role models, like Prof Ekaratne, to get advice. Even today, he gives me real good advice, and I manage my anxiety and stress. Likewise, you need to have mentors or role models and so on, and you can manage your anxiety.

Let us move forward. We know we use pedagogies in class, and we can see whether these pedagogies can be used to address anxiety in students in a classroom. There are different

pedagogies that have been used like a reflection on life experiences, inclusive pedagogy and so on.

Particularly we need to be inclusive in a diverse environment, it is really important that we become inclusive using such pedagogies. For example, if we have students speaking Sinhala and Tamil and if we teach in English, sometimes we move to our mother tongue and we might sometimes do injustice to Tamil students, who cannot understand Sinhala. Therefore, we need to be mindful about the diversity in our class, a very simple example that I took for pedagogies to become inclusive, so that anxieties can be lowered.

And then student centered pedagogy, which Prof Ekaratne taught us. It promotes active learning, and not like you are being seated as a passive learner, but when you are active, your anxiety levels can be managed, and we are encouraging learners in classrooms to come up with their own examples to relate theory to practical examples of their own lives. Further, we promote a very supportive environment, and within learner centered classrooms we become facilitators, not teachers. And we keep the student or learner at the centre of the learning process, and we as the facilitators move to the periphery. When we do this, they feel it, I have done this very many times and published a paper in an international journal about how learner centred pedagogy is encouraging students to become owners of their learning.

When you own something anxiety, distress, all that is kind of a resistance, can be managed. Therefore, it is a method which we can use to lower the anxiety and stress levels of our students and power, we all know that power is in action when human beings are together.

When we move to learner centered pedagogy, we need to maintain an equal kind of a power distance. We must not show that we are above, and the learners are below. But we need to treat them as equal knowledge bases, that is why I highlighted that each one is a knowledgebase, so we need to treat them as equals. This is very easy when it comes to the postgraduate classes much more than the undergraduates, but even the undergraduates, they are unique knowledge bases.

If we move to staff development in Sri Lankan universities, the beginning of it, actually Prof Ekaratne is the person who I would say, took the baton and ran to do justice to some of the people who sacrificed their lives, in the late 1980s. Lot of people interpret this youth uprising in a negative way, but we can see how anxieties of these youth became a point to rethink about Sri Lankan higher education, and Sir you gave the leadership for us to rethink like that. If you go through the book chapter written by Prof Ekaratne and Dr Shrinika Weerakoon, titled, *“How a nationwide student uprising brought about transformative quality enhancement in Sri Lankan*

*Higher Education*”, it highlights what academics and administrators were not doing at that time to address national level anxieties: to develop youth, to address social frustrations and use higher education to help national development.

With this, there was a need to address the issues of the educated youth, and Prof Ekaratne started some training programs for these unemployable graduates at the University of Colombo to develop their skills to match with the skills required by the corporate sector. With that, there was this Presidential Task Force on Higher Education, and they recommended to change the teaching learning methods. Sir, you took it as a real great opportunity and started The Staff Development Centre at the University of Colombo, first of its nature, within the Sri Lankan universities. At this point I must talk about Dr Shrinika Weerakoon but I am not going to talk much, because even now it is very difficult for me to talk about Shrinika who was my very close friend, I will become emotional, so I am not going to talk about her very much. I am sorry. She became a great successor of Prof Ekaratne and continued to serve the nation. The country lost her prematurely and it is a great-great loss to the higher education in Sri Lanka, I am not going to talk much about her because I believe that she still lives in us.

However, we are here because of that change introduced by Prof Ekaratne. I think we can take this forward. And staff development is a way of solving anxiety problems, as we were discussing. We can look at improving individual performance anxieties, looking at the diversities, individual differences and enhancing the learning environment.

There were different sort of programs at the Staff Development Centre, University of Colombo, such as CTHE, SEDA UK and so on. I believe that improving teachers is the most important aspect to improve higher education in Sri Lanka. When I was appointed as a member of the University Grants Commission, I looked for the Staff Development Standing Committee and it had not been active since 2016. Then I requested the Commission to reconvene it and spoke to Sir, Prof Ekaratne. I said, I want to reconvene the standing committee and train the trainers for staff development. For my luck Sir agreed. We are reconvening the standing committee on staff development next week and Sir is in the process of working on the handbook, the academic induction manual. We will be working together with the directors of staff development of all the universities from next week onwards to improve the quality of teacher training in all 17 state universities. Sir is the pillar of strength behind this initiative because, if he said ‘no’ then I would not be able to do this because it is difficult for us to find a person competent as Prof Ekaratne to do this, the most timely and relevant task. So, thank you Sir for accepting my invitation and we

are working together because we are coming closer to the date that we are having the Standing Committee and the first Training of Trainer workshop. Having said that I am coming to the closure of my speech. I hope I discussed something that is relevant, and you have something to take home. Thank you ever so much again for this invitation and I wish all the presenters the very best for your presentations. Thank you again.