

## STAFF DEVELOPMENT AND INSTITUTIONAL READINESS FOR EXPANDING HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA - ARE WE THERE?

Keynote Speech by Dr. Prasanna Ratnaweera

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### 1. THE INEVITABLE EXPANSION

I want to begin with a question: Why aren't our students learning? At Moratuwa University, as a student, it all worked for me—lectures, tutorials, peer support. But at the Open University of Sri Lanka, my students did not have the same experience. Pass rates were poor. Engagement was low. I had to go beneath the surface—to explore the mechanics of teaching and learning.

I started teaching at OUSL in 1993. There were no lectures—just Self-Instructional Material, Day Schools, lab work, Tutor Marked Assignments, and Continuous Assessment Tests, with an overall mark making learners sit the Final Examination. On paper, a complete system. My students were working adults—with jobs, families, with competing priorities. They were not engaging. They were not doing background learning. Their prior learning was shaky. We expected them to fill gaps on their own, with no lectures, little or no peer support, and limited teacher support. I was trained as a researcher—not as a teacher. I did not know how to address this issue.

In 2003, I enrolled in the ASTHE course, directed by Dr. Suki Ekaratne. We were made to observe our teaching; reflect on *why things are the way they are* and *what incremental changes can improve learner experiences*. The ASTHE introduced me to SLAIHEE. At SLAIHEE most discussions were on conventional learning. I also served as its President in 2017. From 2005 to 2010, I served as the Director-SDC, working closely with the Faculty of Education and its Dean, the late Professor Chandra Gunawardena. She taught me that the principles of effective teaching are universal—but their applications need to be in the context of Open Distance Learning. This talk is, in many ways, a tribute to Dr. Ekaratne and Professor Gunawardena.

OUSL did not ignore these challenges. Over the years, the institution introduced staff development, adopted LMS platforms, video conferencing, strengthened student support, and revised policies to improve learner support, student access and retention, quality assurance. All proactive measures—but the fundamental question remains: Why aren't our students learning? We were also drawing more young adults of school-leaving age. The gap persisted—not from lack of effort we put in, but perhaps from a system not fully aligned with the realities of the learners we now serve. This is not OUSL's story alone. Perhaps the story of higher education in Sri Lanka today.

Students do not engage adequately with learning activities. Peer support networks are often used to outsmart assessments—not to deepen understanding. Submissions are increasingly produced by General Purpose AI tools—raising questions about what we

actually assess. They manage to proceed with lower order thinking skills, while higher order thinking skills are rarely attained. What steps can we take to promote authentic learning? More regulation—or a fundamental rethinking of how we teach and assess? I trust this conference will deliberate on these challenges, drawing on your deep engagement in improving higher education effectiveness.

Nearly two-thirds (approximately 66%) of GCE A/L candidates qualify for university—yet only about 30% secure places (approximately 24% through state universities, approximately 6.5% through OUSL); with over 35% of qualified candidates without access to higher education (DOE, 2025; UGC, 2023; OUSL, 2024). The Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER)—total tertiary enrolment (regardless of age) expressed as a percentage of the five-year age cohort immediately following upper secondary graduation age (UNESCO, n.d.)—for Sri Lanka stands at 22.96% (2022), up from 21.36% (2021) (World Bank, 2022; UNESCO, 2022).

In Sri Lanka, students typically complete A-Levels at 18–19. The GER uses the five-year cohort of 18–22 as the denominator for a given year. This denominator includes all individuals in that age bracket—including O/L and school dropouts (a legal and social concern), TVET students, NEET youth (not in education, employment, or training), and those in employment. The numerator includes all tertiary enrollees of any age during that same year, such as repeaters, mature students, and those who delayed entry.

The NCHEPD Draft Progress Report (2026) targets 40–50% GER by 2036 (with a minimum of 30% as a short-term target), proposing ODL expansion, bridging programmes for vocational-academic mobility, and strengthening regional HEIs and TVET institutions. It also proposes credit transfer, Recognition of Prior Learning, lateral entry, and cross-framework mobility—mechanisms already facilitated by many degree programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka.

The NCHEPD Draft Progress Report (2026) signals a policy movement towards the expansion of higher education. Drawing on Trow's framework (1974, as cited in Trow, 2007), higher education systems fall into three phases based on the Gross Enrolment Ratio: the elite phase (GER below 15%), which serves a small, privileged minority; the mass phase (GER between 15% and 50%), which involves significant expansion where higher education becomes a right for those with formal qualifications—Sri Lanka's GER of approximately 23% is targeted to be raised to 30%; and the universal phase (GER above 50%), where higher education becomes an obligation for a large segment of the population. The challenge is not just expanding access—it is transforming how we teach and how we organise learning.

## **2. THE CONVENTIONAL TEACHING MODEL**

The conventional teaching model was designed for an elite system—one that served a small, select group of learners. It assumes that students are highly motivated, have strong prior knowledge, and have time for full-time study. These assumptions are no

longer valid. The conventional model is resource-intensive, teacher-dependent, and space-constrained. It cannot scale to meet the needs of mass higher education. Most significantly, it prioritised content delivery over developing higher order thinking skills. It produced compliance, not capability.

### **3. THE NEW LEARNER**

The student population today is more diverse than ever. Working adults need flexibility. School-leavers bring their own expectations and challenges; many are not prepared for self-directed learning. Students come with varying levels of prior knowledge and study skills. Despite holding A/L qualifications, they may lack required prior knowledge—a key reason for dropout.

Generation Z (born 1995–2009) are digitally native, value flexibility, and increasingly question the relevance of traditional education (Deloitte, 2025a). The Gen Z cohort of 31%, 39% have opted out of higher education due to financial constraints, 34% due to family circumstances, 26% desiring flexible learning, and 21% disinterest in traditional formats (Deloitte, 2025a). In New Zealand, high tuition fees (40%), lack of practical experience (28%), and doubt about curriculum relevance (25%) are concerns (Deloitte, 2025b). Bangladeshi (65%) and Pakistani (70%) youth favour skill-based education over degrees (Iliasov et al., 2024; Zafar et al., 2023). In the Sri Lankan context, youth perceive a curriculum-employment disconnect (Perera et al., 2019). Vocational qualifications suffer low social recognition despite strong international demand (CIPM Sri Lanka, 2023). Only 56% of Indian graduates are job-ready; Computer Science (80%) and IT (78%) are most employable (India Skills Report, 2026).

Generation Alpha (born 2010–2025) is the first truly 'AI-native' cohort. The oldest will enter higher education in 2028, with radically different expectations (Maplethorpe, 2025). Seventy-one percent intend to enrol (conditional on adaptation); 56% prefer hybrid learning; 92% expect devices; 65% already use AI tools; 75% see technology as crucial (Maplethorpe, 2025). However, AI enhances analytical and creative skills, but excessive use may impair social-emotional development and mental health (Routray et al., 2026). The VET2Sustain report highlights equity and wellbeing concerns—data privacy, screen time, online safety, and ethical safeguards (Haataja & Haapakorpi, 2025). Gen Alpha's arrival in higher education will demand significant transformation.

### **4. THE CENTRAL IMPERATIVE—DEVELOPING HIGHER ORDER THINKING SKILLS**

For higher education expansion to succeed, learners must develop traits that equip them for self-directed, lifelong learning. Drawing on Gargallo López et al. (2020), these span five dimensions: cognitive, metacognitive, affective-motivational, social-relational, and ethical. Beyond these foundational skills, learners must also be adaptable and employable. This signals a shift from what teachers deliver to what learners become—that is, from compliance to capability. Achieving this requires

collective effort: institutions, curriculum developers, teachers, and professional entities must work together to facilitate such experiences.

The modern workplace and society require individuals who can think critically, solve complex problems, and create new knowledge. Without higher order thinking skills, graduates are not employable or adaptable. Expansion without HOTS is expansion without purpose.

Drawing on Bloom's Taxonomy (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964), higher order thinking skills include analysing, evaluating, and creating. In practice, students should be able to critically evaluate information, solve problems in unfamiliar contexts, synthesise ideas, construct reasoned arguments, create original work, and reflect on their own thinking.

If HOTS are not deliberately developed, learners progress with only lower order skills, cannot adapt, and the entire expansion effort fails. Every decision—curriculum, assessment, teaching method, technology—must be evaluated against one question: Does this develop higher order thinking?

Engaging students in a hybrid learning environment is the single greatest challenge—a profound shift from traditional classroom teaching. Institutions need adequate physical and digital infrastructure, and qualified human resources. The shift from teacher-centric to student-centric learning has its own costs. Many young adults expect and thrive in an environment with peer support, collaborative learning opportunities, and social interaction—demands physical and digital spaces.

## **5. THE TEACHER'S ROLE—FROM CONTENT DELIVERY TO COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

The teacher is the single most important factor in whether students develop higher order thinking skills. Everything else—curriculum, technology, infrastructure—must work in tandem with the teacher's efforts. Without skilled teachers who can facilitate thinking, no model will succeed.

Teachers must shift from delivering content to facilitating higher order learning; develop self-directed learning skills; design authentic assessments; and provide timely feedback. It becomes the teacher's responsibility to promote the development of learning traits among learners, in addition to creating knowledge relevant to the discipline. In practice, teachers must design learning activities that demand analysis, evaluation, and creation. They must ask questions that provoke thinking, not recall. They must provide feedback that develops metacognition. They must model thinking processes, not just solutions. They must create a safe environment for intellectual risk-taking.

The teacher's role also extends to helping students accurately interpret learning outcomes, as students often struggle with this. Additionally, the gradual development of learning traits requires internalisation, the highest level of the Affective Domain

(Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). Such values guide behaviour and cannot be 'taught' directly—they must be nurtured through experience, feedback, and support, with the teacher playing a central role in this process.

Learning takes place through a range of designed interventions: subject-specific instruction, industry inputs during the programme, internships and training opportunities, and the deliberate cultivation of learning traits. All these elements—teaching, curriculum design, industry engagement, and learner development—are equally important. The teacher must direct and organise these diverse activities.

Technology cannot develop HOTS on its own. No curriculum, however well-designed, can substitute for skilled facilitation. Most teachers were trained in the conventional model and need support to make this shift. Staff development must be reoriented toward HOTS facilitation. This requires institutional commitment, time, resources, and courage.

## **6. WHAT ELSE MUST CHANGE**

### **Distinct and Shared Responsibilities**

**Institution** – Institutions must enable entry policies that accommodate diverse learners, ensure curriculum flexibility, support learner-centred pedagogy, provide robust learner support mechanisms, implement quality assurance mechanisms, and supply the physical and digital infrastructure necessary for effective learning.

**Curriculum Design and Development** – Approach curriculum design as a holistic process, not as a checklist to tick. Design programmes with outcomes aligned with SLQF (UGC, 2015) requirements—each outcome to be developed progressively during the study period. Identify prior learning requirements. Design suitable entry points with bridging mechanisms and exit points. Embed industry and professional inputs.

**Industry and Professional Entities** – Provide guidance on evolving workforce demands; offer internships and mentorships that connect learning to practice; contribute to curriculum development to ensure relevance and authenticity; and foster cross-organisational Communities of Practice. These contributions are particularly valuable in helping learners identify potential career paths and select suitable course combinations that align with their aspirations, including opportunities for self-employment and independent practice, and in equipping them with the practical competencies needed to succeed.

### **Preparing Learners for Success**

Learners must take ownership of their learning journey. They must engage actively with materials, peers, and feedback; develop self-regulation and metacognitive skills; and co-create their learning pathways where possible. This requires adapting to limited teacher interaction, using the LMS effectively, and developing self-learning and self-

management skills. Students must cultivate self-directed learning skills—setting goals, managing time, and taking ownership of their progress. They must build metacognitive awareness by planning, monitoring, and evaluating their own learning. Affective traits—resilience, curiosity, integrity, and self-belief—must also be nurtured. Ultimately, learners are not passive recipients of knowledge but active participants in their own development

## **7. MAKING IT WORK—THE PRACTICAL VISION**

Each stakeholder has a distinct contribution. The institution must enable flexibility, support pedagogy, and provide infrastructure. Curriculum design must be holistic, outcomes-driven, and progressively developed. The teacher must shift to facilitating learning, designing authentic assessments, and providing timely feedback. Industry and professional entities must provide guidance, internships, and contribute to curriculum development. Learners must take ownership of their learning, engage actively, and develop self-regulation.

To move forward, there is a clear need to redesign teacher development programmes with a focus on HOTS facilitation. Curriculum and assessment must be restructured to develop higher order thinking progressively. Investment in learning design expertise, building institutional capacity for change, and creating a shared vision across all stakeholders are also essential. While decision-making occurs at different levels of the management hierarchy, it is crucial that the efforts of teachers, students, and institutional leaders are aligned towards a common agenda.

## **8. CONCLUSION—A HOPEFUL PATH FORWARD**

The question is not simply "Are we there?"—the question is "Will we choose to get there—together?" The expansion of higher education is inevitable and welcome. However, the present model needs to focus on developing the capacity of learners to think, learn, and contribute meaningfully. The elite model, while effective for a select few, does not adequately support the expansion needed to serve the many. We must therefore transform how we teach, how we assess, how we support learners, and how we prepare teachers. We have a shared responsibility to ensure that higher education does not just enrol more students, but genuinely develops their capacity to think, learn, and contribute. Our focus should be to ensure that the promise of an authentic higher education becomes a reality for the many.

Thank you.

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