

# The Decay of University Education in Sri Lanka

## A Rejoinder to the Performance Audit Report of the National Audit Office on Arts Education

*Muttukrishna Sarvananthan*

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This paper is dedicated to the author's former students who are children of war  
deprived of competent facilitators of learning and mentors of research

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**Key Words:** Academic/Intellectual Fraud, Higher Education, Plagiarism, Predatory  
Publications, Public Universities, Sri Lanka

### **Author Bio**

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### Abstract

This is a critical analysis of and critical reflections on the Performance Audit Report (PAR) of the National Audit Office on the arts stream education at senior secondary school and university undergraduate level in Sri Lanka. The PAR claims that arts stream education has failed to produce employable graduates because the curriculum is academic oriented rather than skills oriented. This rejoinder to the PAR argues that the university education is failing to produce employable graduates because it is neither academic oriented nor skills oriented due to both institutional decay of the public universities in Sri Lanka as well as the decay of individuals, especially the academic staff, in the public universities in Sri Lanka in the last 50 years or so (1972-2021).

### Introduction

The National Audit Office has published a performance audit report entitled *Propensity to tend education under the Arts stream and the unemployment of Arts Graduates* dated November 18, 2020 (National Audit Office, 2020).

First of all, the Auditor General's Department should be commended for proactively undertaking this performance audit in terms of the Article 154(1) of the Constitution of the country and Sections 3(1)(b), 5.2, and 12(h) of the [National Audit Act, No. 19 of 2018](#).<sup>1</sup>

Most of the data and analyses stemming therefrom could be true, but certainly not the whole truth. Therefore, the remedies suggested therein are also only partial. We are aware that many current and former academic staff at the public universities in Sri Lanka have critically commented on the performance audit report publicly in print media in Sri Lanka.

There are far more fundamental and ingrained problems within the education system in Sri Lanka than those revealed in the aforementioned performance audit report. This rejoinder to the report is aimed at disclosing many of the fundamental and ingrained maladies of the education system in Sri Lanka, other than highlighted in the aforesaid performance audit report.

We have kept our disclosures anonymised because the intention of this rejoinder is not to find fault with any particular institution/s or individual/s; rather these critical reflections are to highlight the systemic failures and problems in the public universities in Sri Lanka.

Thus, this rejoinder complements the performance audit report of the National Audit Office and critical evaluations thereof made by many (present and past) academics in Sri Lanka. This is also aimed at contributing to the suggestions sought from the public by the Ministry of Education and State Ministry of Education Reforms to [reform](#) the school and higher education sectors in Sri Lanka.<sup>2</sup> The foregoing initiative follows the [National Education Policy 2020](#) of India.

The coverage and reach of the primary and secondary (school) education in Sri Lanka, overall, is reasonably inclusive and widespread due to the universal free education instituted in the mid-1940s (United Nations, 2016), which carries-on to date. However, education in the science stream at schools is neither inclusive nor widespread; mostly restricted to urban and semi-urban areas. More importantly, the quality of school education has been progressively declining ever since 1970 (if not before). Similarly, the public universities in Sri Lanka have continued to deteriorate in terms of quality of its teaching and research compared to the times of the erstwhile University of Ceylon<sup>3</sup> between 1942-1972.

The reform of the school education system should begin with the reform of the university education system as well as the National Colleges of Education (NCE) (teacher training colleges) first and foremost. It is the universities and the teacher training colleges that provide the teachers to the schools in Sri Lanka. Unless the universities and teacher training colleges are of highest quality, the schools cannot recruit highest quality teachers. It is a vicious cycle of schools depending on the universities and teacher training colleges to produce top quality teachers for their schools, which schools in turn could supply quality students to the universities and teacher training colleges.

However, this rejoinder will cover only the public universities because the author does not have any knowledge of the National Colleges of Education (teacher training colleges) in Sri Lanka. Moreover, this rejoinder does not claim to address all the maladies afflicting the public universities in Sri Lanka, but many critical maladies are touched upon. Furthermore, the revelations herein are primarily drawn from arts, humanities, law, management, and social sciences faculties, but other faculties such as engineering, medicine, and science faculties are not immune from such decay.

## **Institutional Decay**

### **Governance Structures of the Universities**

Any reform of the universities in Sri Lanka should begin with its governance structures. A complete overhaul of the governance structures of the public universities and indeed the University Grants Commission (UGC) is *sine qua non* for the reform and upgrading of the universities in Sri Lanka in order for them to become globally competitive. This inevitably necessitates the overhauling of the [Universities Act No.16 of 1978](#) and subsequent amendments thereof itself.<sup>4</sup> Or, even better, a completely new Act should

be enacted in order to suit the imperatives of higher education and the evolving world of work in the post-pandemic world of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

To the best of the knowledge of this author, there are two major and one minor categories of academic staffs in the public universities in Sri Lanka: the major categories are (i) those who do not have much aspiration/s (or ambition/s) as regards their career progression (but could be intellectually competitive), but expect any promotion as a rite of passage over time by virtue of their seniority (probably about 50% of the total academic staff in any particular university), (ii) those who are ambitious in their academic career (although not necessarily intellectually competitive), but certainly not ambitious in achieving excellence in research and/or pedagogical innovations in teaching or facilitating learning, rather they are ambitious in gaining administrative positions over time by hook or crook (who are inept and mediocre teachers and involve in fake research) (probably between 30-40% of the total academic staff in any particular university); and (iii) the third and minor category of academic staff are genuinely and seriously committed to advancing basic and applied knowledge production through cutting-edge research and innovative teaching methods and facilitation of innovative learning methods (probably between 10-20% of the total academic staff in any particular university), who are certainly intellectually competitive (globally) and significantly above the rest of the academic staff within their own universities as well as within Sri Lanka. The broad percentage or the range of percentages given herein are not based on any hard research or evidence, but based on learned and informed guesstimates. We also acknowledge that these percentages would certainly differ among academic staff in different faculties of a university, between different universities, and/or between the same faculties in different universities.

This author has painfully observed that the goal/s of the vast majority of the aspiring or ambitious academics in the public universities in Sri Lanka are to seek positions of power; i.e. to become a member or head of this committee or that committee, student counsellor at the department or faculty level or senior student counsellor at university level, office bearer in university teachers' association, Head of Department (HoD), Dean of the Faculty, and ultimately probably becoming a Vice Chancellor. There is nothing inherently wrong in seeking administrative positions. What is mind boggling is that they actively seek the aforementioned positions not to deliver better quality services for the students (who are the primary and overwhelming stakeholders and beneficiaries of a university), but to gain marks/points for their promotion/s and in some cases to make money (or even to physically/psychologically/verbally abuse the students, especially female students) through graft (use of administrative authority for personal gain).

### **Vice-Chancellor**

The Vice-Chancellor (VC) of a university is vested with overwhelming monopoly power of decision-making on financial allocations and expenditures and purchase of material resources, recruitment of human resources (both academic and non-academic staff), etc, for the university. Although several committees (such as the finance committee,

management committee, selection committee for recruitment of staff, etc) exist for making decisions, and subsequently such decisions have to be ratified by the University Senate and/or the Council, in practice the VC wields the power to take decisions independently (or in consultation with a coterie of cronies) and push those decisions (by means of a memo) through the respective committees, the Senate, and/or the Council.

In effect, a Vice Chancellor of a public university in Sri Lanka is a Sally/Jack of all trades, because the office-bearer is the Chief Operating (Administrative) Officer (COO), Chief Executive Officer (CEO), and indeed the Chief Financial Officer (CFO). Constitutionally, even the President of the country does not enjoy such all-encompassing power (because the parliament is the authority for public finance), as there is no separation of powers in the university system and therefore it would result in serious conflicts of interest. Never ever in a private company the COO/CEO and the CFO are one and the same person in any country of the world.

However, I am aware that a handful of VCs in Sri Lanka (e.g. Peradeniya) have delegated their powers through the appointment of Deputy Vice Chancellor/s (*ala* Pro-Vice Chancellors in many western country universities). I am very sorry to say that in the case of many Vice Chancellors of Sri Lankan universities, they are hardly competent in their respective academic discipline (especially in terms of their research output and impact), let alone in administrative, operational, and financial matters.

For instance, I am aware of a Vice Chancellor currently in office (January 2022) whose meagre research publications (including publications in predatory journals) to date (after more than 30 years since the completion of his Ph.D. in a western country in 1989) have been almost entirely co-authored (but not the first author or the corresponding author) with his Ph.D. supervisor and a couple of his students (which is in a predatory journal) and/or a former colleague who is an academic at a foreign university. Only the Ph.D. thesis of this VC is published as a sole author. Almost all the research outputs of another current Vice Chancellor of a Sri Lankan university are either conference papers or publications in predatory journals; again, all of them are co-authored (but first-author in a few).

Sri Lanka is overwhelmingly a patronage/matronage driven society, whereby members of the aforesaid committees (including the Senate and Council) scratch each other's back and usually comply with the decisions already taken by the VC. It is the case that, what memos are submitted to and discussed in these committees itself is manipulated by the VC with the help of the executive administrative staff (Registrar, Deputy Registrars, and Assistant Registrars) who function as *ex-officio* secretaries to the various committees, the Senate, and the Council. Sri Lankans are generally compliant and submissive people who comply to higher authority/ies, including in the academia. Because of the foregoing servitude, the VC is vested with enormous powers similar (or even more) to that of the Executive President of the country, albeit within the university.

The VCs are so power hungry and control-freaks so much so that even the requests for duty leave to vote at the elections have to be approved/signed by the Vice Chancellor. Surely, the VCs should be spending their valuable time on much more serious matters/issues and provide value for money to the tax payers instead of involving in such mundane matters/issues.

Because of the enormous overwhelming powers vested on them, the VC should be held PERSONALLY responsible or liable along with the members of the various committees, the Senate and/or the Council, for every decision taken at a university, so that any judicial (in a court of law) or quasi-judicial (at the University Services Appeals Board - USAB) challenge to any decision by a university should be PERSONALLY borne by the VC as well as each and every member of the respective committee, and each and every member of the Senate and/or the Council of a university. In addition to the VC, the other members of all the committees (including the Senate and the Council) should also be held PERSONALLY responsible, so that they do not become mere rubber stampers of the decisions of the VC or scratch each other's back.

The VC or any other member of the respective committee, the Senate and/or the Council cannot absolve personal responsibility for their collective decision/s taken and pass the buck to the institution, that is the university. Today (and throughout history), many VCs, Senate, and Council of the public universities in Sri Lanka in many occasions do take arbitrary and/or illegal decisions on the basis that any legal cost of a subsequent legal challenge to their decision/s are borne by the state because their legal representatives are the state counsels from the Attorney General's Department.

The Vice-Chancellor of a university should not be elected/selected among the academic staff of the same university because there is an inherent, very serious, and debilitating conflict of interest. Although in theory, in terms of the Universities Act No.16 of 1978, the Vice-Chancellor of a university need not be from the same university, in practice vast majority of the Vice-Chancellors in the public universities in Sri Lanka have been elected/selected from the same university.

At least in one of the public universities in Sri Lanka, any academic from a minority religious group in that district/region is unofficially barred from holding the post of Vice-Chancellor of that particular university through sheer manipulation of the respective Council (the highest decision/policy making body/authority in a university). Such blatant violation of the Constitution of Sri Lanka has been practiced with impunity in the nearly fifty-years of its existence. Ironically, such blatant religious discrimination is practiced by the university concerned, while at the same time seeking parity of status nationally with the majority religious group in the country. Such naked duplicity is anathema to any university, which are by definition supposed to practice universality and uphold diversity.

Therefore, the Universities Act should be amended to bar candidates from the same university to contest for the post of Vice-Chancellor in any university, and make

individuals (VC, Registrar, Deputy/Assistant Registrars and individual members of various committees, the Senate, and the Council) rather than the institution to take FULL moral and legal responsibility for decisions taken therein.

In the armed forces, the chain of command is accountable and answerable to all the decisions and the execution of such decisions by subordinates. In similar vein, the Vice-Chancellor and individual members of the Council of a university should be personally held accountable and liable for all its decisions and execution thereof.

The Vice-Chancellors of public universities in Sri Lanka are much keener in mobilising financial capital (either from the government or from international development partners) for physical expansion of their respective universities and campuses, rather than mobilising human and intellectual capital to improve the quality of teaching and facilitation of learning of the students, increase and improve the production of new knowledge through research and dissemination, and foster innovation.

The Vice-Chancellors are keener in the expansion of physical infrastructure in their respective universities primarily because they could inscribe their names in the ceremonial opening plaques of such physical infrastructure for posterity. At least for some Vice-Chancellors, such physical infrastructure developments are sources of additional income as well from the contractors. Whereas mobilising high-quality human and intellectual capital for their respective universities would not bring them such fame or monetary reward.

### **Registrar, Deputy Registrars, and Assistant Registrars**

The executive administrative staff of a public university holding the positions of Registrar, Deputy Registrar, or Assistant Registrar should not be allowed to remain in the same post at the same university beyond a stipulated time period (e.g. 3 or 5 years the most) and should be subjected to transfer to other public universities in the country in the same way other public servants are subjected to, including in the school administrative system.

Although, according to the [Universities Act No.16 of 1978](#), the non-academic staff (including executive level administrative staff) of any university can be transferred to another university, in practice it hardly takes place unless such a transfer is voluntarily sought by a particular non-academic staff.

The executive level administrative staff hold enormous power which is susceptible to abuse and corruption. When the positions of Vice-Chancellor, Dean, and Head of Department are fixed-term appointments (usually 3-years), I cannot understand why the executive level administrative staff should hold unlimited terms of office. I have heard that many senior academic staff manipulate and/or bribe executive level administrative staff for their promotion/s, and in some cases even in the recruitment of new academic staff to their respective department.

## **Members of the Council**

Roughly half the total number of members of the Council of a public university in Sri Lanka is appointed by the University Grants Commission (UGC). The rest half is composed of ex-officio members such as the VC (Chair of the Council) and the Registrar (Secretary to the Council), the Deans of all the Faculties, and a nominated member from the Senate.

The majority of the UGC appointed members of University Council are political appointees nominated by the ruling party politicians of the district/s where the university is situated, who are usually not learned persons nor respected or widely known citizens in the district/s concerned. However, some UGC nominated members of the Council are learned persons who are usually retired academics or professionals from the same university or from other parts of the country. In these circumstances, the university administration (especially the VC) finds it easy to manipulate or even dupe the Council members.

The political appointees could collude with the university administration or involve in influence peddling, for a price of course, especially in the recruitment of academic and non-academic staff. There are also anecdotal evidences to show that many of the politically appointed members of the Council hardly speak-up or contribute to the decisions made at the Council meetings, which has created an impression that they are occupying this position mainly because of the payment made by the university for attendance and the travel cost for the members who travel from faraway places.

Even worse is the fact that, at least one member of the Council of a university was/is suspected to have aided and abetted a politically motivated killing in Colombo while being a member of the intelligence wing of a terrorist organisation in the past (almost fifteen years ago). After the end of the civil war, he was also suspected to be a facilitator of illegal migration to Australia.

Therefore, the members of the Councils of the Sri Lankan universities should be appointed on merit based on their academic and/or professional credentials or proven exceptional public service to the local community concerned as in advanced industrialised countries.

## **Modalities and Scheme of Recruitment and Promotion of Academic Staff**

There are lot of manipulation, malpractices, and outright fraud in the recruitment, promotion, and retrenchment of academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka. The foregoing is reflected in the enormous number of appeals and fundamental rights petitions filed at the [University Services Appeals Board \(USAB\)](#),<sup>5</sup> the Court of Appeal, and the Supreme Court of Sri Lanka respectively in the past twenty years or more.



Currently, anyone with a first class or second-class (upper) honours/special degree is eligible to apply for the post of lecturer (probationary) ([University Grants Commission, 1997](#)). To the best of the knowledge of this author, Sri Lanka is the only country in the world which recruits university teachers with just a bachelor's degree, albeit under probation. Although, within three years after recruitment, the appointee should successfully complete a Master's degree (with a research component) in order to become a 'confirmed' lecturer (to regularise the employment), in practice this is merely a rite of passage, in most cases, by way of enrolling/completing an M.A. or M.Phil. degree at the same university.

The university students become guinea pigs for these probationary lecturers whose knowledge of the subject matter and teaching skills are rudimentary (or worse). Therefore, the eligibility criteria for university teachers must be revised (in accordance with global practice) to make it mandatory for an applicant to an academic position to have successfully completed a doctoral degree at another university other than the university in which the appointment is sought. An exception could be made for candidates with a successfully completed Master's degree (in another university other than the university in which the appointment is sought) in addition to relevant exceptional professional or work experience.

Moreover, in the same way as the election/selection of the Vice-Chancellor (as suggested above), the academic staff to any university should not be recruited among the graduates and/or postgraduates and/or doctorates from the same university. That is, the candidates should have earned at least one of their degrees from another university other than the one in which employment is sought.

The widespread and entrenched recruitment of most of the academic staff of any university among the graduates/postgraduates/doctorates of the same university has resulted in a vicious cycle of patronage, inadequate performance (let alone non-performance), inefficiency, and a compliant/submissive culture that has stifled academic freedom and critical thought, and eroded merit-based recruitment and merit-cum-performance-based promotion.

Furthermore, the remuneration of academic staff should be performance-based, and should not be based on uniform scale for each grade of employment/position held, in order to increase competitiveness, productivity, and efficiency of the academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka.

Ideally, the recruitment of academic staff to individual Sri Lankan universities should be outsourced to global recruitment agencies like most Singaporean universities do. The Sri Lankan private recruitment agencies cannot be trusted for this function. The second-best option could be to centralise recruitment of academic staff to all the public universities by the UGC. However, this author would not trust the UGC as well, given the entrenched culture of patronage, nepotism, and favouritism in the Sri Lankan public sector, and indeed in the society at large.

## Professors

The recruitment or promotion to the post of confirmed lecturer, Senior Lecturer, Associate Professor, or full Professor ([University Grants Commission, 2005](#)) should be urgently revamped as follows. The following is a minimal list.

- Presentation of papers in conferences organised by the same university, or another university in Sri Lanka should be made ineligible to be counted as a research output, and therefore should not be awarded marks in the recruitment scheme.
- Publication of research articles in a journal published by the same university or in a journal published by another university in Sri Lanka should be made ineligible to be counted as a research output, and therefore should not be awarded marks in the recruitment scheme.
- Publications in predatory journals or by predatory publishers should be strictly prohibited.
- Publications of books or articles in Sinhala and Tamil languages should be outlawed because of rampant plagiarism, collusion, and/or impersonation in ALL the public universities in Sri Lanka. Whereas there are software/s to detect plagiarism in English publications, there are no such checks and balances for publications in Sinhala and Tamil languages, which invariably leads to rampant/blatant forgery and infringements of copyright.

## Senior Professors

Currently, any full professor holding the position for eight years is, automatically eligible to be promoted as Senior Professor ([University Grants Commission, 1997](#)). Again, this is a recipe for disaster. Literally, what the UGC is saying is that longer you warm the seat, you will be eligible to be promoted to Senior Professor. This is a ridiculous waste of public money and dilution of the quality of the university concerned.

Instead, the promotion to Senior Professor should be based on performance such as globally competitive outstanding research output. That is, performance based objective criteria should be used for promotion to the post of Senior Professor such as the Transparent Research Performance Scheme of the UGC instituted in late 2018 ([University Grants Commission, 2018](#)). This suggestion does not mean to say that the Transparent Research Performance Scheme is ideal, because Google Scholar research impact metrics have their inherent deficiencies ([Teixeira da Silva, 2018](#)). Besides, Google Scholar (unlike Scopus and Web of Science) is an automated service by Artificial Intelligence (AI) and therefore unfortunately captures predatory publications as well. Scopus database is not immune from capturing predatory publications either ([Machacek](#)

[and Srholec, 2021](#)). Yet, some benchmark is better than nothing. Scopus and Web of Science have their own limitations as well, in addition to the inclusion of predatory publications.

More importantly, the UGC's minimum requisite h-index ([Hirsch, 2005](#)) for each tier of performance (in the Transparent Research Performance Scheme) is very low compared to global standards ([Tetzner, 2019](#)), and therefore should be raised. For example, the current minimum requirement of h-index 11 for the top tier 4\* researcher in social sciences should be increased to h-index 20. Correspondingly, minimum requirement for researchers in other sciences should also be increased.

### **Emeritus Professors**

Today, in many Sri Lankan public universities any Tom, Dick, Harry, Sally, or Polly can become an 'Emeritus Professor' on the recommendation of the concerned Faculty Board. Globally, Emeritus Professorship<sup>6</sup> is bestowed on retired academic staff who have had a distinguished (literally, not metaphorically) proven track record of research and teaching, and whose continued attachment to the university concerned would be an asset to boost the global ranking and standing of that university. In contrast, many of the current Emeritus Professors of Sri Lankan universities could be liabilities not only to the university concerned, but to the wider society as well.

Therefore, in order to make the position of Emeritus Professor valuable to both the beneficiary/recipient and the donor/supplier (concerned university), certain objective criteria should be stipulated to make one eligible for that exceptional honour. Such objective criteria could be in the lines of the Transparent Research Performance Scheme of the UGC instituted in late 2018 ([University Grants Commission, 2018](#)).

### **Decay of Academic Staff: Academic and Intellectual Fraud**

#### **Plagiarism**

There is scant regard for ethical professional conduct in teaching, research, and indeed in teacher-to-teacher or teacher-to-pupil/student relationships in the public universities of Sri Lanka. This is a global problem as well ([List, et al, 2001](#)). But the difference is that, whereas in Sri Lanka there is hardly any penalty for such unethical professional mis/conduct and therefore it is carried-on with impunity (see below for examples), in countries like America, Singapore, or the UK penalties are severe, where expulsion is very common. Therefore, while the unethical professional mis/conduct in the UK, USA, and many developed countries are exceptions, it is the norm in Sri Lanka (especially in the Arts, Commerce, Humanities, Management, and Social Sciences academic disciplines) and many other developing countries throughout the world.

A significant proportion (greater than 50%) of academic staff in the Sri Lankan universities (particularly in the Arts, Commerce, Humanities, Management, and Social

Sciences academic disciplines) are literally quacks who are in their current position NOT because of academic competence (let alone excellence), but because of patronage by their former university teachers or authorities, through intellectual fraud committed by way of plagiarism, collusion, and/or impersonation at examinations and in the conduct of research and/or publications. Plagiarism<sup>7</sup> is a global phenomenon as well ([Anonymous Academic, 2017](#)). While plagiarism is an exception in developed countries, in Sri Lanka and most developing countries it is the norm (especially in the academic writings in non-English languages, which are very difficult to detect because of absence of plagiarism detecting software in non-English eastern languages).

This author is aware of a case where, in spite of the university concerned was/is privy to irrefutable (and beyond reasonable doubt) evidence of plagiarism (word-to-word, paragraph-to-paragraph, and page-to-page)<sup>8</sup> of a senior academic staff (in Economics), that particular staff was promoted to the position of professor in August 2019, subsequently promoted to head of department in February 2020, continues to be a candidate for chair professor of economics, and continues to remain in those positions to date (January 2022). In spite of being a serial plagiariser, this academic staff is allowed to continue teaching research methodology for undergraduate students, and supervise undergraduate and postgraduate (M.Phil. & Ph.D.) dissertations.

Although the foregoing case was reported to the UGC way back in April 2019, it just passed the buck to the university concerned as usual (in the name of autonomy of universities, of course), and the university authorities and the Council in turn dumped the complaint to the dustbin. Instead of inquiring into the case, this particular university authorities have been on a witch-hunt of the complainant in contravention of the [Witness Protection Act No.4 of 2015](#).<sup>9</sup>

Since the university and the UGC did not take any action, an appeal has been formally filed at the [University Services Appeals Board](#) (USAB - Appeal No.1000), with irrefutable and beyond reasonable doubt evidences. Although 25 months have passed since the filing of the appeal at the USAB in December 2019, the inquiry has not commenced to date (has been postponed four times) keeping-up with the well-established judicial tradition in Sri Lanka. Needless to say, justice delayed is justice denied.

There is also circumstantial evidence to suspect that the aforementioned senior academic staff who has been proved of plagiarising most of his publications (both monographs and articles) in his mother-tongue, had hired a Pakistani student who was his colleague at a Chinese university to write his Ph.D. thesis in English language in order to obtain his doctoral degree (in Macroeconomics) at the same Chinese university.

In the circumstance that this particular senior academic staff cannot even compose an electronic mail (e-mail) in reasonable English even today (13 years after obtaining his doctoral degree in 2008), one does not have to be a rocket scientist to suspect his Ph.D. thesis written in English. Even more glaringly, at the very first hearing of the aforesaid appeal at the USAB on June 30, 2020, when the Chairperson of the USAB told him

something in English, the academic alluded to above (who was the last respondent) publicly told that he could not understand English, and therefore what was said by the Chairperson had to be translated into his mother tongue by the appellant on the request of the Chairperson. How could have a person, who could not understand or comprehend simple English, written his Ph.D. thesis in English at a Chinese university? Apparently, there are "paper mills" (who advertise their services openly) in China that produce research articles or theses with forged data, fake peer-reviews, and outright plagiarism including complete translation of theses in Chinese language to English) ([Mallapaty, 2020](#))

### **Fake Research and Predatory Publications**

In the last decade (if not before) fake research and "predatory" (coined by Jeffrey Beall) publications ([Committee on Publication Ethics, 2019](#); [Beall, 2013](#)) have become a serious threat to academic and intellectual integrity worldwide, particularly in developing countries, but in developed countries as well. With the ascent of 'open access' publications in the last decade, especially in the cyberspace, there is mushrooming of counterfeit academic journals and publishers whose primary motive is profit and not academic standards, intellectual integrity, or scientific ethics. Anyone can publish any trash masquerading as research in these counterfeit journals or with these counterfeit publishers, which are called predatory journals or predatory publishers in academic parlance, for a fee ranging from USD 30 to USD 500 (or more).

In the traditional business model of research dissemination/publications, the researchers (or the funder/s of respective research) do not pay to get their research published, instead the users or the readers of research publications who pay to access the research outputs (i.e. research dissemination is secured by a paywall). In the 'open access' business model, it is the reverse; that is, it is the researchers (or the funder/s of respective research) who pay to disseminate/publish their research, and the users or readers of the research outputs get access free-of-charge.

Authentic and genuine research undergoes anonymous double-blind<sup>10</sup> or single-blind<sup>11</sup> peer-review (usually by two or more academics) and do not require any payment for the consideration of a research for publication either as a journal article (article processing fee) or as a monograph/book. Exceptionally, a few journals (usually American), which receive high volumes of submissions, do charge an article processing fee in order to dissuade low quality submissions. The peer reviewers of authentic/genuine articles or books are volunteers who never get paid for their peer-review function and undertake this function as a matter of academic/professional duty on a honorary basis.

However, in recent times (in the past decade or so), one can publish a journal article in an authentic/genuine peer-reviewed journal as an 'open access' article with the payment of a fee, ONLY after that particular article is accepted for publication following a rigorous peer-review process. These genuine open access articles would cost anything between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000 or more depending on the academic discipline. Many such genuine journals provide a discount for researchers/authors from developing

countries (i.e. from least or less developed countries, as well as from lower-middle-income countries). In any case, the cost of most of the open access articles in genuine journals are borne by the funding body/agency and not by the individual author/s because the fee is prohibitive.

Whereas, 'open access' articles in authentic/genuine journals and their publishers require payment only after rigorous peer-review and subsequent acceptance of the article for publication by the respective editor, who is independent of the publishing company or body, the predatory journal publishers demand full payment upfront at the time of submission of articles for consideration for publication. Although predatory journals do not guarantee that one's article will be accepted for publication, in practice they must and do accept most of the articles submitted in order to keep their business afloat.

Moreover, authentic/genuine journals or publishers rarely send emails requesting researchers to publish in their journal or with their publishing company. In contrast, predatory journals and publishers routinely send unsolicited emails to researchers requesting submissions to their journals ([Dadkhah, et al, 2017](#)). This author, on average, receives at least one such email per week. Moreover, even after I unsubscribe those unsolicited emails, they keep on sending. In some of these unsolicited emails there is no provision to unsubscribe at all. Obviously, these predatory publishers obtain the email addresses of researchers from the articles they publish in authentic/genuine journals.

Most of the aforementioned fake open access journals operate from developing countries such as, for example, China, Egypt, India, Nigeria, and Turkey (in alphabetical order; not necessarily in terms of number of predatory publications) ([Machacek and Srholec, 2021](#)).<sup>12</sup> Almost all the articles published in these predatory journals are co-authored by multiple authors. This business practice is consciously followed in order to decrease the cost per author and thereby make it affordable. For example, if a journal charges USD 500 per article and if there are five co-authors for a particular article, each co-author would pay USD 100 each. Thereby, five authors (from the same university or from different universities in the same country or in different countries) would get credit for such an article from their respective universities (in their application for promotion and/or for research award/s). Selling co-authorship for articles accepted for publication in genuine/legitimate journals published by reputed global academic publishers (such as the Elsevier) is a new business rivalling the predatory journal publishers ([Abalkina, 2021](#)).

Almost all the English language journal articles claimed to have been co-authored (for example, with Chinese, Iranian, Pakistani, and Turkish authors) by a senior academic (in Economics) in the Sri Lankan university I had referred in the previous section are in predatory journals; many in horrific English. In none of these fake or predatory articles this particular senior academic staff of a Sri Lankan university is the first author or a corresponding author. It is most likely the case, that this senior academic has purchased co-authorship from these predatory journals with zero contribution to such articles. Moreover, he claims to have published his Ph.D. thesis (as noted above, suspected to have been written by someone else) by Lambert Academic Publishers (LAP) based in Germany,

which is a well-known and publicly exposed predatory publisher ([Charles Darwin University, 2021](#); [Brezgov, 2019](#); [Collins, 2010](#)).

There is another academic in another Sri Lankan university, who has obtained a doctoral degree in Psychology (counselling/social work) in 2018 from the very same Chinese university the senior academic referred to above (and in the previous section) had obtained his Ph.D. from, who has published a monograph/book (probably the author's Ph.D. thesis, most likely purchased from a paper mill in China) by the same predatory Lambert Academic Publishers (LAP) in Germany. Besides, all (bar just one) of the journal articles published by this Sri Lankan academic are co-authored with more than ten (in some cases more than 20) Chinese academics wherein this particular Sri Lankan author is not the first author or the corresponding author in any of those articles. But, all, but just one, are in authentic/genuine/legitimate journals.

The foregoing example demonstrates that, sometimes the journal itself is a predatory journal and therefore all articles carried by that particular journal could/should be suspected to be fake, in some other cases the journal which carries an article could be authentic/genuine/legitimate, but the article concerned and/or some of the co-authors could be fake. That is, a case of selling co-authorship in articles published in authentic/genuine/legitimate journal/s.

Even more contentious and intriguing is the fact that this particular Sri Lankan academic has published articles along with more than 10 (in some cases with more than 20) former Chinese colleagues at that particular Chinese university as well as from other Chinese universities in academic disciplines vastly different from the academic's own (for example, in clinical medicine including cancer, cardiology, stroke, etc). There is ONLY ONE article authored individually by this particular academic, which is in a positively identified predatory journal.<sup>13</sup>

We do understand that in medical sciences (unlike in social sciences) it is the norm for numerous researchers to undertake research collaboratively and publish the same with numerous co-authors. This is because, according to their professional practice, ALL those who provide clinical samples or patient data for a particular research are mandatorily eligible to become co-authors, whether they are involved in the analyses and/or writing of the research paper emanating from that research or not.

We are also aware that, according to the UGC marking scheme for research publications, when there are more than two co-authors, the first author gets 40% of the total marks (2 marks for non-indexed journal publication and 5 marks for indexed journal publication) claimed and the balance 60% of the marks is divided equally among all other co-authors. So, in cases where there are 10, 20, or 30 co-authors, all the authors other than the first author is eligible to claim only a negligible mark (i.e. 60% of 2 or 60% of 5 divided by the total number of co-authors).

However, that is beside the point I am trying to make here. The fact that an academic whose academic discipline, viz. Psychology/Counselling/Social work, could contribute to clinical medical research and publication is totally unbelievable. This example demonstrates that there is a well-organised criminal syndicate that violates all ethical, moral, and indeed legal codes of conduct in research and intellectual property ownership by selling co-authorship for a price (see for example, [Abalkina, 2021](#)).

Plagiarism and predatory publications have become critical or the norm in the Sri Lankan academia, especially after the introduction of an incentive scheme by the name of 'research allowance' to the academic staff of the public universities by the government of Sri Lanka in 2011 in order to promote research (see below for details). Historically, Sri Lankan academic staff have been attuned to think that teaching and administration were their primary duties at universities.

### **Stealing Students' Dissertations**

Another common fraud that takes place in the public universities in Sri Lanka is the stealing of students' dissertations (including undergraduate dissertations) by the supervisors of such dissertations. There is abundance of evidence whereby university teachers steal dissertations by their supervisee students (without the consent of the students and attribution to such students) to claim monthly research allowance as well as publish articles or even textbooks and monographs.

A senior academic (in Economics) at a public university in Sri Lanka referred to above as a serial plagiariser as well as publisher of predatory articles (whose promotion has been challenged at the USAB) is a king pin in this kind of fraud as well. This particular senior academic is the first author of a co-authored (so-called) textbook on Knowledge Economy along with a junior academic in the same department, which was the M.Phil. dissertation of the latter (which itself is partially plagiarised) that was supposedly supervised by the former. It was a *quid pro quo*, whereby the student (who was a graduate of the same department and subsequently a school teacher) probably allowed his supervisor to publish his dissertation as a co-authored monograph, in return for an academic job in the same department. Eventually, this particular M.Phil. student was hired by the same university as a Lecturer (Probationary) in Economics in late-2018. With these kinds of fraudulent university teachers, how can graduates of Sri Lankan universities get decent jobs?

The same senior academic has very recently stolen an undergraduate dissertation of a female student (which he supervised) who graduated in 2020 to make an [online presentation](#) on *Thirukkural*<sup>14</sup> and Economics in Tamil language along with resource persons from Tamil Nadu and Canadian Tamil diaspora on April 17, 2021.<sup>15</sup> The fact that, in spite of already being charged on allegations of plagiarism and predatory publications at the USAB, he is defiant and continues to engage in academic and intellectual crimes is a perfect example of impunity at the public universities in Sri Lanka.

### **Unethical Practices**



A senior academic at a Faculty of Medicine in Sri Lanka has refused to share the raw data on which a group of academics (including her) have written an open access research paper in an international journal. This team's research was funded by a grant from the National Research Council (NRC) of Sri Lanka (Grant No. NRC 14-27), which is a government institution funded by the tax payers' money. Globally, it is a common ethical practice in the academia as well as in private and public research institutions to share raw data on which a research paper is based, if requested. In fact, many journals nowadays make it mandatory for the authors to upload the raw data in electronic format along with the submission of the article for consideration. If the particular article is accepted for publication, then the journal will deposit the raw data online in the form of supplementary file/s along with the article.

In spite of the claim by the authors that "The data in this study is available from the corresponding author on request", repeated requests made by this author to the corresponding author of the article since January 2021 has been persistently ignored to date. This unethical behaviour by the corresponding author casts doubt on the authenticity of this particular study. I believe the National Research Council of Sri Lanka will investigate this matter and stop further funding of this senior academic.

### **Predatory Conferences organised by the Universities in Sri Lanka and Abroad**

Since the introduction of an incentive scheme for academics in the Sri Lanka universities to undertake research, from January 2011 a 'research allowance' of 35% of the basic monthly salary is paid to academic staff in accordance with the Establishments Circular Letter No.3 of 2011 of the University Grants Commission ([University Grants Commission, 2011](#)).

This has resulted in the organisation of annual "international" research conferences by many faculties in all the universities in Sri Lanka in order to facilitate academic staff to present research papers and thereby become eligible to claim the monthly research allowance. The research papers presented in these conferences are mostly of poor quality in spite of the claim made by the organisers that they are peer-reviewed (even in the cases where peer-review is carried out, it is mostly done by the academics of the same university that organises the conference (who do not have a track record of published research on same/similar topic), rather than by subject specialist peers in other Sri Lankan universities or from foreign universities). In practice, most of these conferences are sham. Most faculties that organise these international conferences charge a fee from their own academic staff, as well as from academics in other Sri Lankan universities and from foreign universities for presenting a paper or poster in return for a 'certificate' of presentation. This author is aware of many cases where academics from completely different academic disciplines present papers at conferences organised by a totally different faculty (e.g. a presentation by an academic from the Faculty of Hindu Studies at an international conference organised by the Faculty of Management and Commerce at the same university). These sham conferences generate

revenue for different faculties and facilitate claiming of marks/points for academics who present papers or posters in their application for promotion/s; a win-win quack activity for both the authors and the faculty concerned, while seriously impairing the sanctity of the academia.

It is not only the Sri Lankan universities that organise these predatory conferences, there has been mushrooming of regional (South Asian or Asian) and global networks of such sham conference organisers whose only motive is to charge a conference registration fees from the prospective paper or poster presenters and make profit. There is hardly any rigorous peer-review process nor vetting of submissions by these predatory conference organisers. Literally, one can present any trash at these international conferences and indeed get a certificate for such sham presentation, so that it could be submitted as evidence of their research to claim the research allowance and their promotion/s in the local Sri Lankan universities.

For this author, any conference presentation made locally, regionally, or globally (at authentic conferences as well as at sham conferences) should not be counted as a credible research output unless and until that particular conference presentation is eventually published in an authentic peer-reviewed journal or book.

The fact that the UGC provides 0.5 marks for each conference paper or poster presentation by an academic staff, irrespective of the quality of such paper/poster, is a real con art of deception. Therefore, the UGC should immediately cease the practice of providing marks for conference papers or poster presentations in the process of recruitment or promotion of academic staff, and thereby disincentivise such scams taking place in the public universities in Sri Lanka.

In order to promote international research collaborations, the UGC also encourages universities to sponsor their academic staff to attend international conferences by paying all or part of their travel and accommodation costs plus the conference registration fee. Although this incentive scheme of the UGC is worthy and commendable, in practice this worthy scheme is also sometimes abused by unscrupulous academics in many Sri Lankan universities.

For example, I am aware of an international conference organised by a sham Malaysian university which organised an international conference in 2018 where one could present research papers in Tamil language. A number of academics from a local university (probably from other Sri Lankan universities as well) who attended this conference and made presentations in Tamil language were partly or fully sponsored by the public money of the university. I am personally aware that many such oral presenters made avail of that opportunity mainly to tour Malaysia on public money.

Competitive and quality academics need not pay from their own pocket or that of their university or institution to present a paper or poster in a genuine international academic conference. If their paper or poster submission is accepted for presentation after

rigorous peer-review, the entire travel and accommodation costs are usually met by the sponsor/s of those conferences (either the host university and/or external sponsor/s).

The foregoing examples of unethical practices reveal that the UGC should devise strict benchmarks and guidelines for the organisation of various conferences by the public universities in Sri Lanka, as well as for the participation of Sri Lankan academics at conferences abroad. The UGC should faithfully fulfil its mandate of "The maintenance of academic standards of Higher Educational Institutions" in terms of Section 3 of the [Universities Act No.16 of 1978](#).

In sum, these predatory conferences are a rip-off of public money and public property by the relatively better educated class of people to the huge detriment of the vast majority of the citizens of this country. If indeed the UGC is unable or unwilling to reign in such predatory conferences, it should simply stipulate that conference presentations are not eligible for the claim of research allowance as well as for promotions, which would automatically disincentivise organising or attending such sham conferences here or abroad. Again, these sham international conferences are predominantly organised by arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences faculties of the public universities in Sri Lanka.

### **Journals published by the Universities**

Similar to the international conferences, there has been mushrooming of journals published by different faculties in all the universities in Sri Lanka (either in traditional printed form or in virtual form online or both/hybrid) since the introduction of a 'research allowance' of 35% of the basic monthly salary payment to academic staff in accordance with the [Establishments Circular Letter No.3 of 2011](#) of the University Grants Commission (UGC).

In the same way as the so-called international conferences, these university faculty-based journals do not undertake credible anonymous peer review (by subject specialist peers from outside their own university or from foreign universities) of the articles submitted or maintain adequate standards and thereby undermine the academic integrity and sanctity of research and academic publications. However, these university faculty-based journals cannot be classified as predatory journals because they do not charge any fee (unlike the so-called international conferences) for publishing articles therein. Yet, many articles published in these in-house journals are sham or of poor quality.

Moreover, many of these journals accept articles in national languages (Sinhala and Tamil) as well, which leads to widespread plagiarism, collusion, and impersonation. While plagiarism could be detected if the articles are in English language through many available software/s, it is very difficult to detect plagiarism in Sinhala and Tamil articles or publications because it is very time consuming.

Again, it is the utmost responsibility of the UGC to clampdown on such bogus academic journals and regulate such publications by setting benchmarks and standards that are globally practiced. The UGC should faithfully fulfil one of its core mandates of "...maintenance of academic standards....." and cannot afford to ignore and pass the buck to individual universities in the name of autonomy of individual universities. The UGC could also stipulate that publications in the journals published by Sri Lankan universities do not qualify for research allowance or promotion/s in order to disincentivise such sham publications.

Once again, these sham university faculty-based journals are predominantly published by arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences faculties. This does not mean to say that the journals published by other faculties are of good quality.

Needless to say, the foregoing examples of blatant plagiarism, predatory publishing, and sham conferences and journals amount to pickpocketing of the public purse by a coterie of the relatively better educated population of this country with impunity to the detriment of the vast majority of the population.

### **Conflict of Interest of University Teachers functioning as G.C.E. A/L Examination Paper Setters and Markers**

Another curious practice in Sri Lanka is that university teachers (including professors and senior professors) act as examination question paper setters and indeed supervisors of the markers of the answer scripts of the General Certificate of Education (G.C.E.) Advanced Level (A/L) (higher secondary) examinations. The Department of Examinations under the Ministry of Education taps university academic staff (on voluntary basis) to set the question papers for all the subjects as well as to supervise the marking of the answer scripts of the students subsequently. Because of this practice of the Department of Examinations, such paper setters are hired by popular private tuition houses to conduct revision classes for their students just before such public examinations.

Even more atrocious is the fact that many university lecturers in Sri Lanka provide tuition for GCE A/L students either individually at home or at private tuition houses, which are a very common sight both in rural and urban areas in the country. Such private tuition classes by university teachers are popular among the school students and their parents on the anticipation of potential disclosure of public examination questions in advance.

This author has also come to know that the reason why many academic staff in the universities voluntarily sign-up for the foregoing temporary assignments is not the paltry sum of payment made by the Department of Education for such assignments, but to directly or indirectly help their private tuition students as well as their own children (or that of their kith and kin) who may be sitting for the GCE A/L examinations in a particular year.

In late-2020, this author was aware that even an incumbent Vice-Chancellor of a local university (who has a co-authored article in a predatory journal as noted above) was involved in the supervision of marking of the answer scripts of a particular subject in the G.C.E. A/L examinations conducted in October 2020. His only child is expected to sit for the G.C.E. A/L examinations in a couple years' time. Surely, a Vice-Chancellor should spend time much more appropriately and productively and do justice to the salary drawn than supervising the marking of answer scripts of the G.C.E. A/L examinations. It appears that no task is too small or mundane for a public university Vice-Chancellor in Sri Lanka. What a shame!

The foregoing is a classic example of patronage, nepotism, and corruption of some top-level academic staff, which goes on unchecked with impunity. The Ministry of Education and the UGC should jointly act to stop the aforementioned nefarious practices of patronage, which seriously undermines the integrity of secondary school public examinations and indeed the subsequent university education.

This author is unaware of any developed country where the foregoing nefarious practice take place.

### **Salaries of Academic Staff**

The salaries and allowances of the university academic staff is one of the highest (if not the highest) in the public sector of Sri Lanka. Historically, salaries of the academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka used to be on par with that of the judges of the judicial services in Sri Lanka, and the executive grade staff of the Central Bank of Sri Lanka (CBSL).

Through trade union agitation, the Federation of University Teachers' Association (FUTA) has been successful in considerably increasing the basic salary as well as substantially increasing various allowances (especially the newly introduced research allowance equivalent to 35% of the basic salary of each grade staff since 2011) of the academic and executive-level non-academic university staff in the past decade. Thereby, to the best of the knowledge of this author, currently the academic staff of universities are believed to be at the top of the pay scales of the public sector employees in Sri Lanka.

Therefore, it is imperative for such highest paid employees of the tax payers (vast majority of whom are ordinary masses because almost 80% of the total tax revenue to the government accrues from consumption taxes as opposed to income taxes) to provide value for money to the citizens of this country. As demonstrated in this rejoinder to a timely performance audit report of the National Audit Office, unfortunately the majority (over 50%) of academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka are failing the people of this country by swindling precious scarce public finances through unethical, immoral, and indeed illegal unacademic practices and activities.

In this precarious situation, the National Audit Office in general, and the Auditor General in particular, as the regulator and chief trustee of the public money/finance in Sri Lanka is hereby called upon to undertake a forensic scientific performance audit of the entire public universities and public research institutions in the country on behalf of the citizens of the country.

### **Teaching in National Languages at Universities**

Most of the courses in the faculties of arts/humanities/social sciences in almost all the universities in Sri Lanka are taught in national languages, viz. Sinhala and Tamil, even today in this 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Probably it may be necessary to teach vernacular languages and religions in national languages, but certainly not other arts/humanities/social sciences subjects.

Compared to other sciences (biological/engineering/medical/physical), theories of arts/humanities/social sciences (and empirics thereof) change much more rapidly. For example, Sir Isaac Newton's pathbreaking laws of motion and universal gravitation in the late 17<sup>th</sup> Century (Newton's Laws) dominated physical sciences theory for nearly 250 years before it was superseded by the theory of relativity by Albert Einstein in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. However, theories in arts/humanities/social sciences change quite often, usually in less than 50 years of time (sometimes even within a decade or within a couple of decades).

Every single day hundreds of thousands of new research are disseminated/published globally in the arts/humanities/social sciences academic disciplines, bulk of which are in English language. Therefore, it is imperative for both the university teachers and the students to be proficient in English language in order to keep-up with the latest theoretical and empirical developments in their respective academic disciplines and thereby keep their academic, empirical, and real-world knowledge up-to-date and relevant. How can the students who are taught in national languages in Sri Lanka become globally competitive workforce?

The rationale and imperative for the entire university curricula to be taught in English language is not because of servitude to a colonial/global language, but for the absolute necessity of real-time knowledge acquisition and skills accumulation. The learning of English language and the proficiency thereof is not merely for acquisition of a soft skill per se, as the performance audit report on arts education makes out to be, rather it is primarily for acquisition of real-time cutting-edge theoretical and applied knowledge in their respective academic disciplines.

In fact, the academics who continue to champion teaching of courses in national languages are not doing so because of their love for their mother tongue or for their country at large. They champion teaching in vernacular languages in order to continue swindling the tax payers of this country by churning out plagiarised fake text books, monographs, and articles in blatant violation of the copyright laws of the country and the globe and in

violation of ethical academic practices. These quacks, masquerading as 'patriots', are endangering the progress and upward mobility of our treasured children and students.

This author is personally aware that in one of the Faculties of Arts in the country, the students are poisoned by their senior academic staff claiming that, if the teaching in the faculty is done in English, then students from the majority ethnic group in the country would join thereby marginalising the students from the region.

It is ironic that the UGC is wittingly or unwittingly allowing such ghettoisation to take place among the students in the name of the autonomy of universities. Universities by definition are supposed to promote diversity and preach universality of humanity. No university in the world could claim to be a symbol of identity of any particular race or faith. If anyone claims that a particular university is a symbol of identity of a particular race, faith, or culture, then it ceases to be a university.

### **Research Committees in Universities**

Many of the research committees at public universities in Sri Lanka, namely the Research Management Committee at the university level and Faculty Research Committees at each faculty, are filled with people who may not know what research is and/or who do have very little (if at all) acknowledge of research ethics, methodologies, etc.

In Sri Lanka, seniority, rather than merit based on performance and output, is the all-important qualification for the position of heads of the aforementioned research committees, inter alia. One of the Vice-Chancellors I had referred to above is the head of his university research management committee with a mere h-index of 7 (incorporating predatory journal articles) in Google Scholar metrics (as of January 2022). There are a handful of academics in the same university with h-index 25 or above, who are more qualified to be the head of the research management committee.

The head of the research committee in the Faculty of Arts at the same university in 2020 was/is NOT in the Google Scholar at all. That is, not a single publication to his credit in English language. Yet, as the head of the research committee at his faculty, he scrutinises applications for research allowance by academic staff in the faculty. He is elevated to the position of chairperson of the faculty research committee position simply because he is a professor. According to the policy of the university concerned, only a professor or a senior professor could head any faculty research committee. He is also rumoured/suspected to be a long-running serial abuser of his female students.

### **Physical and Verbal Harassment of Female Students**

It is widely known in local communities where universities are situated that physical and verbal sexual harassments of female students by male academic staff are rampant in the campuses in Sri Lanka. Female students in the faculties of arts/humanities/social

sciences are the worst affected. This is because the students of these faculties are from the bottom of the social strata and therefore very vulnerable to predators.

But very little action (if at all) is taken against the perpetrators by the university authorities. Firstly, because of their vulnerable social positions, the victims usually do not report such crimes in the campuses fearing retribution in the marking of their examination answer scripts (which is virtually impossible to challenge) as well as because of social stigma that could accrue to the victim. Secondly, anonymous complaints are dismissed out of hand by the authorities, which are blatant attempts to protect the perpetrator. Thirdly, even when complaints are made in writing, in most cases there appears to be a tendency to protect the perpetrator rather than the victim.

There are many cases of suicides and attempted suicides by the student victims of sexual harassment by teacher perpetrators in the public university campuses in Sri Lanka, but these incidences receive relatively less attention or action by the university authorities ([Hoole, 2016](#)) than the suicides and attempted suicides due to ragging of fresher students by senior students ([Premadasa, et al, 2011](#)). Centre of Gender Equality and Equity set-up in every public university in Sri Lanka is mere eyewash. These centres are eager to entertain and investigate complaints against fellow students rather than against teachers of the universities.

Such double-standards practiced by the university authorities as well as the UGC has resulted in amplifying student transgressions on their fellow students through ragging ([Mohan, 2020](#)), at the same time downplaying or even hiding teacher transgressions on their students ([Hoole, 2016](#)). For example, the UGC has set-up an online ragging complaint portal for students to make complaints about ragging in any university. However, there is no such online portal set-up by the UGC for the students to make complaints against sexual predators among the academic staff. Why is this duplicity?

During August-September 2020, there was a case of persistent psychological harassment of a group of female students verbally during his lectures by a senior academic in Economics referred to above. One of the students in the group complained about it and sought emotional help from a senior female academic staff in another department in the same faculty. That senior female academic was so terrified to provide emotional support by way of referring that group of female students to the Counsellor at the Wellbeing Centre of the same university (because of the fear that the harasser might turn against her), and sought the help of a male colleague to refer those students to the counsellor at the Wellbeing Centre.

Such is the toxic environment at public universities in Sri Lanka, so much so that, even female academic staff are reluctant to directly help female students undergoing persistent and serious emotional, physical, psychological, and verbal harassment by male academic staff. Under this toxic environment, how can the students (especially females) complain about their teachers stealing their academic work such as dissertations?



The male academic staff who was requested to help the affected female students, in addition to referring the students to the counsellor at the Wellbeing Centre, had asked the VC to give a pep talk to the affected batch of students who have been terrified by persistent innuendos and stigmatisation, which had not been even acknowledged by the VC (let alone acted upon) to date.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The curriculum of arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences are outdated in most public universities in Sri Lanka. The syllabuses of such academic disciplines are being carried on for several decades now ever since the establishment of several independent public universities in Sri Lanka beginning 1979. This is because most university teachers in the aforementioned disciplines are not proficient in English language and therefore cannot read and understand the latest research outputs or knowledge creations globally. Therefore, many of today's academic staff teach what they have learned from their own teachers, mostly at the same university, and tomorrow's academic staff will teach the same syllabuses of their teachers today, again mostly from the same university. Thus, it is a vicious cycle of outdated syllabuses being recycled perpetually.

Unlike in developed countries, almost all academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka become part of the furniture of their respective university, having graduated from the same university, subsequently being employed by the same university, and a considerable number of them becoming emeritus professor after retirement until their death. Thus, there is hardly any mobility of academic staff between different public universities within the country, partly because the remunerations are uniform across universities for each grade of academic staff as a result of the absence of a performance-based remuneration scheme, and partly because of the absence of inter-university competition between the public universities. This has resulted in a very sterile intellectual environment with very little incentive for aspirations towards intellectual excellence in research and/or pedagogical innovations. Generally, the psyche of average Sri Lankans is antithesis to competition.

With the ongoing endemic pandemic of COVID-19 and the advent and popularisation of virtual teaching (Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and Google Classroom becoming household names/brands), university teachers are increasingly depending on online resources, very little of which most of them can properly understand or comprehend because of lack of English language proficiency. The end result is that our treasured students are being cheated with substandard and sometimes fake knowledge borrowed online.

The performance audit report by the National Audit Office (2020: 14) erroneously claims that "Developed countries uses (sic) the education to create skilled persons whereas Sri Lanka used (sic) education to create academic persons." Nothing is further from the truth than this erroneous claim, in the cases of both developed countries as well as Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, this erroneous claim by the National Audit Office is a very serious

misunderstanding of the university education in developed countries, as well as a huge overstatement in the case of Sri Lanka.

This author would like to humbly contend that, the school education as well as the university education in Sri Lanka neither create skilled persons nor academic persons. This is exactly the tragedy of the education system in Sri Lanka. This author hereby solicits an open public debate on this contention with all stakeholders. Therefore, I am looking forward to rejoinders to this article from within the country and from the Sri Lankan diaspora communities abroad.

The goals of higher education policy of successive governments as well as of all the public universities in Sri Lanka have always been to increase access to higher education (that is to increase the number of students admitted annually), but the goals have never been concerned with the impact of higher education on finding decent jobs by the graduates and on increasing the quantity and quality of research output and knowledge production and enhancement. Universities are supposed to be not only churning-out employable graduates, rather universities are also equally (if not more) supposed to be the incubations of knowledge production and enhancement.

Research is the bedrock or foundation of knowledge. Without research there are no theories in any academic/scientific discipline. Without theories there is no advancement or progression of any academic/scientific discipline. Thus, research is the basis for teaching of students or facilitation of learning by students. Currently, only around 50% of weightage is given by the UGC for the promotion to a professorship (minimum of 50 marks for research, out of a minimum requisite total of 105 marks). The weightage for research in the applications/promotions for professorship should be increased to 70% as in Singapore and most western countries.

Those who do not undertake authentic/genuine research endorsed by subject-specialist peers (through peer-review) and cited by other scientists cannot be sound teachers, facilitators of learning, or effective supervisors of student dissertations. Therefore, any academic institution, public or private, that does not promote authentic/genuine research and at the same time does not clampdown on fake research, predatory publishing, and copyright or patent infringements through plagiarism and imitation are not worthy of public funding through the blood and sweat of the taxpayers.

In fact, clamping down on fake research, predatory publishing, and blatant copyright or patent infringements through plagiarism and imitation are relatively more important than funding and promoting authentic/genuine research, because the former undo the latter. In the world of business, it is often said that, it may take a very long time to win a customer, but it could take just a second to lose one (by selling a defective or sub-standard product or service). It is also important to remember that one bad apple can spoil a basket of good apples by the spread of organism of the rotten one. This is exactly what is happening in Sri Lankan universities. Rogue academics, who are unfortunately the majority (especially in the arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences),

are proactively teaching their students that plagiarism is permissible and stealing of intellectual property are perfectly admissible and legal. I do acknowledge that the proportion of the bad apples would differ from faculties-to-faculties and universities-to-universities. A proper forensic scientific audit to find out the exact proportions in each faculty and each university should be undertaken in earnest (see below).

In similar vein to the business dictum and the case of bad apples noted above, if the academic and research community in Sri Lanka does not join hands together to stamp out academic and intellectual fraud highlighted herein, our collective intellectual integrity, probity, and sanctity will be doomed (if not already).

This author specifically calls upon the twelve Sri Lankan academics cum researchers who are honoured to be members of the top 2% of scientific researchers in the world,<sup>16</sup> according to the Stanford University in the USA, to rise up to this occasion and join this author in urging both the National Audit Office and/or the UGC to do the needful urgently. Unfortunately, there is a pervasive culture of denial and hushing-up in the university system which has become cancerous in the public universities and antithesis to academic freedom, openness, and innovations. In 2020, a 'Competent Authority' of a public university in Sri Lanka threatened to sue the media, which were accused of slinging mud at his university ([Mohan, 2020](#)).

The following are the humble recommendations by this author to the two target higher public institutions of this rejoinder, viz. the National Audit Office of Sri Lanka and the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka.

### **Recommendations to the National Audit Office**

Some may argue that the UGC should undertake the following, in lieu of the National Audit Office. This author would argue that there would be conflict of interest for UGC to undertake the following because all the commissioners as well as the chairperson of the UGC are from one public university or the other in Sri Lanka. Therefore, it is absolutely necessary for the National Audit Office to undertake the following.

1. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the research degrees (MPhil and PhD) held by each and every academic staff (obtained from both local universities as well as foreign universities) in each and every public university in Sri Lanka (including those which are out of the purview of the UGC) and independent publicly-funded research institutions (such as the National Institute of Fundamental Studies (NIFS), Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), Tea/Rubber/Coconut Research Institute, etc). I do understand that it is a herculean task, but it must be done urgently. This audit should begin at the top; that is, the research degrees of senior professors, professors, and senior lecturers (grade 1) and (grade 2) (in this order) should undergo this audit first. Besides, the senior academic staff in the faculties of arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences should be the first to be subjected to this audit.

2. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the publications (journal articles, book chapters, and textbooks/monographs/creative writings, etc, in all three languages) as well as conference and other oral presentations and posters (in all three languages) claimed by each and every academic staff in each and every public university in Sri Lanka (including those which are out of the purview of the UGC) and independent publicly-funded research institutions (such as the National Institute of Fundamental Studies (NIFS), Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), Tea/Rubber/Coconut Research Institute, etc). I do understand that it is a herculean task, but it must be done urgently. This audit should begin at the top; that is, the publications and presentations of senior professors, professors, and senior lecturers (grade 1) and (grade 2) (in this order) should undergo this audit first. Besides, the senior academic staff in the faculties of arts, commerce, humanities, management, and social sciences should be the first to be subjected to this audit.
3. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the applications for the monthly research allowance by all the academic staff in all the faculties of study and in all the public universities (including those which are out of the purview of the UGC) in Sri Lanka in the past 10 years. This is to find out whether any worthy research has been undertaken, have they been published, have they been cited, etc. This has to be a value-for-money audit.
4. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the journals published in all three languages (English, Sinhala, and Tamil) by all the faculties in all the public universities in Sri Lanka (including those which are out of the purview of the UGC) and independent publicly-funded research institutions (such as the National Institute of Fundamental Studies (NIFS), Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), Tea/Rubber/Coconut Research Institute, etc). This is to find out whether external peer-review of articles have been undertaken either by subject-specialist academics in other Sri Lankan universities or foreign universities, whether the peer-reviews are of sufficient quality, etc.
5. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the research conferences organised by all the faculties in all the public universities in Sri Lanka (including those which are out of the purview of the UGC) and independent publicly-funded research institutions (such as the National Institute of Fundamental Studies (NIFS), Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), Tea/Rubber/Coconut Research Institute, etc). Again, this is to find out whether external peer-review of presentations or posters have been undertaken either by subject-specialist academics in other Sri Lankan universities or foreign universities, whether the peer-reviews are of sufficient quality, etc.
6. Undertake a forensic scientific audit of all the overseas conferences attended by academic staff of the faculties in all the public universities in Sri Lanka (including

those which are out of the purview of the UGC) and independent publicly-funded research institutions (such as the National Institute of Fundamental Studies (NIFS), Industrial Technology Institute (ITI), Tea/Rubber/Coconut Research Institute, etc) that have been funded by the respective universities in the past ten years.

### **Recommendations to the University Grants Commission**

1. Make Ph.D. degree (from a university other than the one in which employment is sought) mandatory for entry level academic staff in the public universities in Sri Lanka.
2. Plagiarism and publications in predatory journals should be outlawed and anyone proved to have committed the foregoing intellectual crimes should be expelled from their jobs instantly. This process of weeding-out plagiarisers and publications in predatory journals and by predatory publishers should begin with senior professors, professors, senior lecturers grade 1, and senior lecturers grade 2 (in this order). The probationary lecturers found guilty of these offences could be given a chance to rectify themselves (only once).
3. Conference paper and poster presentations should not be rewarded in the marking scheme for promotions or recruitments.
4. Rigorous objective criteria should be set for membership and for the chair of the university level research committees and faculty level research committees.
5. Introduce a performance-based remuneration scheme for all grades of academic staff in the public universities of Sri Lanka. Besides, every five-years an independent performance evaluation of each and every academic staff should be undertaken, and if found to be lagging in performance a voluntary retirement scheme (VRS) should be instituted. The positions of those who do not wish to make avail of the VRS should be frozen. That is, they should not be eligible for any further promotion/s in the future unless their performance improves in the next evaluation (after five-years).
6. All promotions and administrative appointments of the academic staff (Head of Department, Dean, heads of various committees such as the university level quality assurance council, etc) should be purely based on merit and not on seniority.
7. The Vice Chancellor of a university should be elected/selected from another Sri Lankan university or from abroad (especially from the Sri Lankan diaspora communities). That is, internal academic staff should be barred from contesting for the post of VC at any university.

8. The marking scheme for the promotion to professorship/senior professorship or recruitment of professors/senior professors should be amended to give 70% weightage for research, dissemination, and impact (citations, patents, etc).
9. The marking scheme for the promotion to senior professorship should be amended to replace the requirement of 8-years of service as professor to some objective criteria based on output (say x number of publications in peer-reviewed index journals after becoming a professor). Merit rather than seniority should be the eligibility criteria.
10. Rigorous objective criteria (based on performance, output, and expected value to the students and university concerned) should be instituted for emeritus professorship.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Parliament of the Democratic Socialist Republic of Sri Lanka, National Audit Act No.19 of 2018. [https://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2018\\_pdf/19-2018\\_E.pdf](https://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2018_pdf/19-2018_E.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> National Education Reforms, Ministry of Education, Government of Sri Lanka, Colombo. <https://egenuma.moe.gov.lk/public/showLanguage.mvc>

<sup>3</sup> <https://cmb.ac.lk/history/>

<sup>4</sup> Universities Act No.16 of 1978 & Universities (Amendment) Act No.7 of 1985, Government of Sri Lanka, Colombo. [https://openjicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/10266559\\_03.pdf](https://openjicareport.jica.go.jp/pdf/10266559_03.pdf) There have been a few more amendments thereafter as well; the latest being in 2019.

<sup>5</sup> University Services Appeals Board, University Grants Commission, Colombo. [https://www.ugc.ac.lk/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=22&lang=en](https://www.ugc.ac.lk/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=52&Itemid=22&lang=en)

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/human-resources/emeritus-professors-guidance-and-procedure>  
<https://www.bath.ac.uk/corporate-information/professor-emeritus-appointments/>

<sup>7</sup> For examples of plagiarism, see Oxford Students, Plagiarism <https://www.ox.ac.uk/students/academic/guidance/skills/plagiarism>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.bowdoin.edu/dean-of-students/judicial-board/academic-honesty-and-plagiarism/examples.html>

<sup>9</sup> Assistance to and Protection of Victims of Crime and Witnesses Act No.4 of 2015. [https://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2015\\_pdf/4%20of%202015.pdf](https://www.srilankalaw.lk/gazette/2015_pdf/4%20of%202015.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Double-blind peer-review means that both the author/s and the reviewer/s are anonymised, whereby both the name of the author/s and reviewer/s are not disclosed to each other by the journal editor.

<sup>11</sup> Single-blind peer-review means that, while the name/s of the author/s are disclosed to the reviewer/s by the journal editor, the name/s of the reviewer/s are not disclosed to the author/s.

<sup>12</sup> See also the latest [Beall's List - of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers \(beallslist.net\)](https://beallslist.net) March 07, 2021, retrieved on May 21, 2021.

<sup>13</sup> See the latest [Beall's List - of Potential Predatory Journals and Publishers \(beallslist.net\)](https://beallslist.net) March 07, 2021, retrieved on May 21, 2021.

<sup>14</sup> *Thirukkural* is an ancient classic text in Tamil language similar to *Arthashastra* (ancient Sanskrit treatise) by Kautilya/Chanakya.

<sup>15</sup> One may listen to the presentation in the following YouTube <https://youtu.be/ziih2u5hhhw>  
See the Viber invitation for the foregoing virtual event in the following <https://invite.viber.com/?g2=AQASOMSHYBxFbkyUoHyhaXJ%2Btr4LDrqy6AuMmn%2B6abWgYiYj4NgNaTD%2Bwc8WZBzN>

<sup>16</sup> [National Research Council \(nrc.gov.lk\)](https://nrc.gov.lk)