# Reclaiming the idea of a university *

LAKSIRI JAYASURIYA

*University of Western Australia, Perth, Australia*

ABSTRACT. The paper traces the changing nature of university education in Sri Lanka from its early model of an elite education to its recent transformation into mass higher education. This has in turn entailed a shift from a tradition of liberal learning reminiscent of Newman's *Idea of a University*, to a more utilitarian technocratic form of higher education. Consequently, the university system has in recent times become enmeshed within the broader social changes and become one of the major sites for social and political struggles. In conclusion, the paper seeks a reappraisal of university education within a differentiated system of higher education but without forsaking the ideals of a liberal education.

KEY WORDS: university education, elite education, higher education, university system, liberal education, higher education in Sri Lanka

## Introduction

The reflections on university education in Sri Lanka are framed in the context of the far reaching changes in higher education characteristic of not only the developing countries but also of advanced western societies. Confronted with this changing dynamic, universities have, as a rule, been overwhelmed by issues of administration and governance. Consequently universities have been forced to devote more time to institutional restructuring and good management than academic leadership on issues relating to education and learning. Policy makers and the academic community in Sri Lanka would be well advised to bear in mind this constraint in considering the future directions of university education.

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* The edited text of the Convocation Address given at the University of Peradeniya in 1996.

However, the desired reforms and changes to higher education in Sri Lanka, regarded for all interests and purposes as university education, should be considered in the light of the experience of higher education over the past fifty years or more. The story of this evolution contains valuable insights which should provide important guideposts in determining which aspects of policy as well as practice deserve priority consideration in fashioning changes to university education. In this context, it should be noted that this account of higher education in Sri Lanka draws on my own experience of university life over many years in several countries, including Sri Lanka.

As in other developing countries, despite the success of Sri Lankan universities in enlarging the pool of scholarly talent, Sri Lanka and third world countries in general are beset with a range of problems which affect the role and functioning of universities in the social and economic life of the nation. According to an influential USA Report on university developments in the Third World, it is said that:

> declining economies, reduced resources for education, enrolment increases, and a pervasive politicisation ... have combined in the impact on universities in several countries to put at risk the sustainability of this institution in the form in which it has evolved (Coleman, 1993: 351).

This admirably sums up the present state of university education in Sri Lanka where the basic dilemma facing Sri Lankan universities is that there has been an unprecedented expansion of opportunities without a corresponding change in the nature of the product or the system of governance. It is essentially a question of how to maintain quality in the face of expanding numbers and diminishing financial resources.

There have been a variety of responses to the dilemma facing the universities in maintaining standards with limited resources. These include such measures as restructuring the curriculum by altering the current bias in favour of the humanities, a redirection of effort towards vocationally oriented courses, a

scaling down of the size of universities and a diversification of the curriculum. Similarly, there have been calls for greater accountability, and also changes in university management such as through the introduction of new and improved managerial practices and quality assurance.

While all of these proposed reforms merit consideration and careful assessment, however, a prior task is the urgent need to define more clearly the nature and scope of university education as a distinct segment of higher education. Given the haphazard and uncoordinated manner in which the higher education sector has evolved, especially in the past two decades, there has been much confusion and misunderstanding about the specific role and function of universities in most countries. This, above all, pertains to meaning and significance of university education in a diversified, tiered educational system, at best, an uncoordinated mix of institutions. But, it is necessary to place the university system in a broadly historical perspective to gain a better understanding of the changing fortunes of university education in Sri Lanka.

**From an elite model university system to mass higher education**

Until recently, university education in Sri Lanka was synonymous with higher education. The University of Ceylon (1942) and its predecessor, the University College established in 1921 were transplants of British university education, catering to the needs of the growing middle class (Peiris, 1964). This was a highly sophisticated model promoted by the local westernised elite, which attempted to emulate the Oxbridge model in Britain. This model was consolidated in the post independence era, and nurtured by an eminent British scholar, Sir Ivor Jennings who later became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Cambridge. In fact, the Peradeniya Campus of the University of Ceylon was very much his brain child (Jennings, 1951).

In its first phase during the 1940s and 1950s this elite university model was based on the principles of western liberal education such as academic

freedom, institutional autonomy and a culture of learning which placed a high premium on scholarly research and a corporate culture. Admittedly, one of the main purposes — but not the sole purpose — was to service the needs of colonial administration, to generate an administrative elite imbued with the values and culture of western liberalism (Jayasuriya, 1968). At the same time, this model of a liberal university education encouraged the pursuit of learning with a degree of intellectual openness through unfettered research and scholarly enquiry based on academic freedom and autonomy in the pursuit of scholarship. The object was to establish a community of scholars, a collegiality which would permit the achievement of the highest standards of scholarship within a tradition of critical detachment and the disinterested pursuit of knowledge.

This highly westernised culture of the university inevitably created a tension between 'traditionalists' and the new modernising elites. As in many other societies, this tension soon became engulfed in the tortuous logic of the emergent nationalism which led to growing cultural conflicts between the westernised elite and those rejecting the alien western influences — a conflict which endures to this day. But in the early days, this was an argument which was carried out with a certain degree of civility, tolerance and respect for one another without rancour or intense personal animosity. This civility in social relations, considerable social trust, and the collegiality ethos mirrored the vibrant civil society which existed outside of the university; in fact, the free and open university system that existed at this time was an essential element of a dynamic civil society.

For over two decades, any attempt to challenge this conservative, meritocratic elite university model was vigorously resisted on the grounds that 'because education is at the expense of the state ... it would be difficult to justify the provision of education beyond the employment needs of the country' (University Council Report, 1949: 9). However, this resistance against opening the doors of the university to larger numbers was soon to be overtaken by egalitarian demands for university expansion by those seeking access to the

benefits of a university education. As Edward Shils (1975) has pointed out, the traditional university in the west too experienced an 'upsurge of anti-elitism' from politicians who sought to take the university to the people. In Sri Lanka, this demand for a greater measure of equality of opportunity was a direct consequence of the system of free education and democratic electoral politics; but more importantly, it was an egalitarianism which was heavily influenced by the growing nationalist sentiments of the period (Jayasuriya, 2003).

These twin social forces of egalitarianism and nationalism resonated with the patrician scholar and university administrator, Sir Nicholas Attygalle, the successor to Sir Ivor Jennings as Vice Chancellor. Sir Nicholas Attygalle, a distinguished and influential medical academic, had a reputation for being the proverbial 'iron chancellor', but also one with a humane and softer side to his nature. It is also true that he guided with a firm hand, the University of Ceylon, which included the Peradeniya Campus, for nearly two decades and ushered in its egalitarian and expansionary phase without necessarily altering the academic ethos of the Jennings era.

Regrettably, the quantitative growth which followed in the wake of the politics of the post - 1956 period was not accompanied by any qualitative changes in the nature and form of university education except for changes to the medium of instruction. The scope and content of the curriculum, especially the dominance of the liberal arts, remained relatively unchanged until very recently. The Attygalle era constitutes a significant phase in the history of Sri Lankan higher education because, during its latter phase, it succumbed to populist political pressures and acted, wittingly or unwittingly, as the hand maiden to mass university education; it also heralded the beginnings of the retreat from the ideals of a liberal education.

The model of mass higher education which began to emerge in the late 1960s, and consolidated in the 1970s, was politically motivated and markedly egalitarian — a demand for a greater measure of equality of opportunity. It was, above all, characterised by a curriculum emphasis on training for the labour

market. This blatant utilitarianism in its approach to university education, which, among other things, led to a diminution of collegiality, an emphasis on demand management, a diminution of institutional autonomy, a credentialing for skills, and the introduction of a bureaucratic style of university governance. The cumulative effect of these changes was a downgrading of the value and worth of the so-called 'ivory tower' intellectuals, and the imposition of restrictions on university freedom. The latter after all, constituted the solid core and substance of Sri Lankan university education, in its elite phase.

The third and most recent phase of university education beginning in the 1970s coincided with the tribulations of a stagnant economy and ill conceived experiments in public policy, all of which were confounded by radical ethnic nationalism and the youth revolt. The youthful intelligentsia belonging to the left and right of politics were highly critical of the educational practices and the values of the earlier decades, and sought to give vent to their frustrations and anger through acts of violence. The universities were not just politicised and deprived of their freedom in this volatile and uncertain environment, but became highly vulnerable to the wider social and political conflicts which impinged on all aspects of university life. The conflict of 'two cultures' and 'two societies' — of the westernised English educated elite, and the indigenous Sinhala/Tamil educated on the one hand, and on the other, 'the haves and have-nots' — had far reaching effects on the 'academic ethos'.

This assault on the university system from within was aggravated by the blatant political manipulation of the university system, nowhere better expressed than in the disastrous unified single university experiment. On a personal note, I should mention that I was a strong dissenting voice to these changes, and also opposed the manner in which the bureaucracy sought to implement the laudable ideals of equality of opportunity.[1] This refers to the introduction of a new admission policy to achieve greater equity in access to the universities by adopting a system of quota-based admissions. Many in the academic community argued strongly but with little success that this new policy ethos was in reality

highly discriminatory — the adoption of a racial quota system for university admissions.

These critics rightly observed that this policy shift was morally repugnant and contrary to the spirit of university autonomy. This misplaced egalitarianism with its emphasis on *equality* as against *quality* was counter productive in that it jeopardised the benefits to those very groups it was committed to helping - the rural Sinhala youth. The expectation that 'universal higher education' would result automatically in substantive equality, or equality of status, has always been an illusory dream of the populist left.

The transition from an elite model to one of mass higher education, inclusive of university education, was consolidated by the conservative governments of the late 1970s and 1980s (1977-93), of J.R. Jayawardene and R. Premadasa. In this process, the consequences of what has been aptly described as 'the unhappy neo-liberal marriage of market principles and authoritarianism' (Giddens, 1994), were very clearly apparent in matters of university governance. Higher education in general and the universities in particular, witnessed a period of 'guided democracy' wherein the state used a mirage of freedom and autonomy to exercise near complete control of university education.

Furthermore, with the 'dismantling of democracy', the effects of the suppression of freedom and the demand for basic human rights was felt acutely in the university community which was stricken with fear, suspicion and distrust; the prevailing ethos of enforced conformity, denial of academic freedom and institutional autonomy destroyed any vestiges of corporate governance and collegiality that had remained. Concurrently, the tensions and disturbing social and ethnic conflicts of the wider society spread to the university and numerous student revolts ravaged the universities with untold violence (de Silva & Peiris, 1995).

Over and above the denigration of the value and worth of a liberal university education, one of the far reaching effects of conservative, market driven educational policies was to reaffirm the utilitarianism of the socialist left.

This policy strategy, achieved by introducing a highly bureaucratic/technocratic system of higher education, was juxtaposed confusedly alongside 'university education'. A guiding principle of the utilitarianism of the free marketers was the overriding need to make education serve developmental needs such as the need for skilled manpower in a market driven economy. Thus, according to Stanley Kalpage, a senior bureaucrat (himself a former academic) responsible for higher education, the educational policies of the universities 'should be geared *primarily* (my emphasis) to national development' (Kalpage, 1996). The buzz word of policy makers was HRD - Human Resources Development - to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of production. This model of higher education which applied also to the university sector was expected to do little more than train students for specific professions and/or vocations (Sanyal et al., 1982).

The new coalition of conservative politicians, anti-intellectual bureaucrats and technocrats who chartered the course of higher education saw no need for any surplus meaning to be attached to university education. Henceforth, the academic values and principles of a liberal education such as those of freedom, tolerance of dissent and collegiality which prevailed in the earlier phase of university education were irrelevant and seen as an impediment to efficiency and progress in a market oriented society. In the broader interests of society, the demand for conformity and control, all of which generated a climate of anti-intellectualism and authoritarianism - the antithesis of a system of liberal education in a free and democratic society.

As Van den Berghe has explained in a different context, it is now well recognised that 'the university [is] one of the major arenas (or sites) of the struggle for political control' (1973:13), and this needs to be acknowledged and understood by all scholars and administrators alike. The naked display of violence in the universities contravened all academic norms of gentility, peace and civility. These actions brought the universities to a virtual standstill and helped to destroy the morale and strength of the university as a community of scholars engaged in the pursuit of learning. Sadly, intellectuals who are often

regarded as the guardians of the university, seen as a sanctuary of dissent, have become the first victims to all repressive political regimes, be they of the left or right.

More importantly, this historical sketch is valuable and revealing in that we can observe that the trajectory of university life mirrors wider conflicts and objectives in the political system. In other words, the university as an institution is constantly expected to meet social and economic objectives of state authorities. As these objectives change, so does the university system. At one level this is perfectly understandable as public institutions resonate to the wider social and political context in which they are embedded. But, at the same time, we need to recognise that the university is an institution with its own values, core ideals, ends, and objectives — all of which are intrinsic to its institutional practice.

The pursuit of these objectives — the time honoured ideals of a liberal education — requires a degree of institutional autonomy to ensure that these social ideals do not succumb to external pressures, especially state control. Furthermore, if institutions of higher learning as public institutions are to resist these social forces, they need to have adequate and guaranteed resources from the state to defend and protect their freedom and autonomy. Otherwise they risk being overloaded by social demands and succumbing to direction and control by forces outside the university. What this brief perspective on the experience of universities in Sri Lanka highlights is that higher education is an easily malleable instrument of public policy, a soft target for governments wishing to pursue other political purposes.

## The university and higher education

In the light of the foregoing a first task facing Sri Lankan policy makers is to undertake a comprehensive review of higher education policies of the recent past, and engage in a reappraisal of current policies and practices. This should be

carried out, bearing in mind the current social and economic realities, and also wider global considerations, especially the emergence of a global social and political order. It needs to be recognised that the university in a developing country, becomes a strategic gatekeeper as well as an indispensable institution for effective participation in the rapidly expanding universal culture of a scientific humanism.

Perhap's, the most critical consideration in any policy reformulation relating to the university sector is the need to pay special heed to addressing the distortions and misconceptions surrounding university education that have occurred following moves from an elite to a mass higher education system. The tensions inherent in this shift have, at the same time, been confounded by a move away from a liberal university education model to one which is decidedly more utilitarian and technocratic. Clearly, the uncritical absorption of universities into a poorly differentiated higher education sector is likely to be detrimental to university education.

One unfortunate consequence of a reclassification of university education as a form of higher education is that the legitimacy of the university as a social institution may be narrowly conceived of in terms of its ability to service identifiable developmental needs. While accepting the logic of this socio-political reality, and pressing the need to resolve the current mismatch between education and employment, it does not follow from this that the universities should succumb to these political imperatives. Such a course of action is severely flawed because it fails to distinguish between different levels within a range of educational provisions and the functional differentiation that should exist in the higher education sector.

It would be salutary, in this context, to consider the recent experience of many countries of the western world, which have sought to do away with distinctions in the higher education sector, such as between the university and the polytechnic in the UK or universities and colleges of advanced education in Australia. Nevertheless, the so-called 'binary system', signifying a two tiered

system of higher education has begun to re-emerge in these countries which established a unified and common national education system (Coady, 2000). To quote one Australian Vice Chancellor, Prof. Gilbert of the University of Melbourne, 'All Australian universities are not equal in quality, nor in function, anymore than within individual universities all disciplines are equal in scholarly repute or achievement' (*The Australian,* 22/02/95).

Stated simply, many countries overseas have failed in their attempt to do away with the sort of distinctions implicit in different segments of the higher education system such as that between a university and a technical institute. Sri Lanka needs to take cognisance of these trends. There is clearly a need to evolve some measure of sensible differentiation between the different types of institutions of higher education. Of course, differentiation will lead to differences in the quality of the end product, and from a consumer's point of view, the product label should point to these differences. At the same time, there needs to be some measure of co-ordination for the system as a whole. This may be achieved through such measures as mechanisms for effecting credit transfers and moving between and across the different levels of higher education. In short, a primary objective in this restructuring must be to have a differentiated but integrated system of higher education which can cater to a variety of needs.

In any functionally differentiated system, the apex of higher education rests with the universities. *But what is* a *university*? It is highly erroneous to respond to this question in terms of aims and objectives without first identifying the true and essential nature of what we understand by a university. We lose sight of the essential significance and meaning of a *university* when we begin to think of it as being intended for a particular purpose, or carrying a set of specific functions such as doing research or training for specific occupations.

To grasp the essential meaning of university, that is, as a special place where one engages in a distinct form of human activity, we need to reaffirm what Cardinal Henry Newman, over 150 years ago in a memorable treatise, called the '*idea of a university*'. Newman's exposition of what is distinctive of a

university in the pursuit of learning enshrines the historical purposes, values, and ideals of a liberal education. Jaroslav Pelican, in a recent reappraisal of Newman's historic *idea* of a university, observes that a university is:

> a place of teaching unusual knowledge, but also of advancing knowledge through research, of diffusing knowledge through publication as well as relating such advancement and teaching and diffusion to the training of professionals' (1992: 88).

Newman's 'idea of a university' was further elaborated at about the same time by the German liberal reformer and humanist, Wilhelm Von Humboldt. Humboldt however, defined the university as 'nothing other than the spiritual life of those human beings who are moved by external leisure or internal pressures toward learning and research (quoted in Chomsky, 1973). For Humboldt, the university is an institutional manifestation of a human need to know and to learn, and it is particularly an instrument in an open and free society equipped to perform a range of tasks, not just one or more of these tasks, seen as the transmission, conservation and extension of the horizons of knowledge. The fulfilment of these tasks Pelican (1992) has argued goes hand in hand with what Newman described as 'a habit of mind ... of which the attributes are freedom, equitableness, calmness, moderation and wisdom' (Newman, quoted in Pelican, 1992). The building of traditions of freedom, of free inquiry, academic freedom and institutional autonomy are fundamental to the *idea of a university* and a liberal education.

In short, what distinguishes a *university* as a special and *distinct* place of learning is the existence of a corporate body of scholars freely committed to the pursuit of learning as members of a common enterprise. In an open and free society, the university is a space reserved exclusively for the exercise of a humane tradition of learning, as indeed, was the case in the early years in the history of the University of Ceylon, later the University of Colombo and University of Peradeniya. Admittedly, any civilised society can ill afford to lose

these distinctive attributes which revolve around a concept of human freedom, and is both enriching and liberating.

**The university as an academic community**

One of the distinctive features of the university tradition of learning is that it involves an academic *community*, a body of scholars, seeking the truth co-operatively of those working in a chosen branch of learning. This corporate body consists of three classes of persons – *Chancellors, Masters*, and *Scholars* (Ashby, 1970). This refers to 'the Administration, Faculty and Students, all of whom are as a community dedicated to the preservation, advancement, and transmission of knowledge' (Ashby, 1970: 4). It is the presence of these three classes of persons and the close interaction that takes place among them that goes to constitute a university - and what marks it out from other institutions of higher learning such as technical and research institutions (Ashby, 1970).

The Administration is a relatively recent development in the university system, and is exemplified in the members of the Chancellery (Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, and other officials). This segment has grown in numbers as well as relative power with the increasing corporatisation of the university in matters of governance. The dedicated scholars are given to the discovery of new knowledge and understandings, these scholars are researchers, who like the monks of the historical monastic centres of learning, are often secluded in libraries or laboratories and buried in their inquires. They seek knowledge and wisdom without fear or favour, and without necessarily wanting to preach or instruct. They are the eternal guardians of the storehouse of human knowledge, as Mathew Arnold expressed it; '*the best that is known and thought in the world*'.

In other words, these scholars, unlike monks, of old protect not only their cultural inheritance, but also the knowledge and truths derived from other cultures. But, in addition to being intellectual conservers, they are innovators and scholars who have the capacity to generate new knowledge untrammelled by

utilitarian imperatives or other impediments. Some of these scholars also become teachers: those who engage in learning and teaching within a university. In short, there is no teacher who is also not a scholar. Another way of saying this is to recognise that teaching and research are intimately linked.

The third and equally important class of persons in the university community are the students — those who came to be taught, and without whom there would be no university, nor indeed, any reason for its existence. Oakeshott (1989) depicts the meaning and significance of a stay at a university for a young undergraduate by stating that it is not simply an 'opportunity' for education or training but 'a gift of an interval': it is 'an interval' in one's life cycle to seek and discover knowledge along with kindred spirits, one's fellows to explore life's options, to be immersed in the wealth of human learning and the rich experience of human civilisations. This 'interval' or space in the life of a person provides an opportunity to engage in a unique kind of activity. It needs to be borne in mind that this 'interval' is valued not necessarily for having helped one to earn a living, but for enriching a person to lead a more significant life. The benefits and delights of these residual learnings are often felt in the most unexpected of circumstances later in life.

By virtue of one's achievements in the university and as a product of a university all graduates form part of the elite of the country, who have a distinct role in society. It has been generally accepted that a university, in performing its appointed tasks, is responsible for cultivating an elite who are charged, among other things, with the responsibility of passing on one's cultural heritage from one generation to another. The formation of this élite has an interesting history in the western university tradition. In the earliest examples of the monastic universities since the 'ownership' of universities rested with the priests or monks, they constituted the elite; and, in the more recent meritocratic phase, it consists of an intellectual class. In a developing country like Sri Lanka, the intellectual class who are the products of the university are likely to have a significant voice and a key role to play in charting the destiny of their societies.

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They are, above all, responsible for the intellectual life of the country, be it in the world of business, education, politics or the fourth estate, media and journalism.

There is no doubt, as pointed out earlier, the 'idea of a university' has often been associated with elitism. This is because the university as an institution conflicts with the democratic ideal of egalitarianism when taken to refer to an equality of status, and not simply equality of opportunity. What we encounter here is the juxtaposition and conflict between the principle of *equality* (egalitarianism) and that of *quality* (elitism). This is a theme well articulated by Thomas Jefferson in his classic statement that while all are 'created equal' there is also a 'natural aristocracy' based on 'virtue and talents'. The polarity between egalitarianism and elitism is, as Pelican correctly observes, it creates 'a spurious antithesis for the university (Pelican, 1992: 151). This is particularly so when elitism is not an end itself, and includes a demand for fairness, i.e., equality of opportunity, which permits equity of access to the benefits of university education.

By its very nature, a university is elitist, but it is a humane and a modest elitism — it is a question of talent, not status; furthermore, it is also endowed with a sense of humility, modesty and integrity. The elitist pursuit of scholarly excellence so central to the idea of a university, is always constrained by a continuous evaluation, and criticism of one's own efforts as well as of others, and an ability to tolerate a diversity of beliefs without denying one's own convictions. The tolerance of dissent arises from a sense of civility and caring in interacting with one's fellows mainly because of a sense of trust and co-operation that is ingrained in the university tradition of learning.

This elitist tradition is humane, just and fair; it is at all times sustained by a deep and abiding commitment to the truth. But, by summarily rejecting the apparent shortcomings of elitism as a form of unfairness characterised by intellectual arrogance, conceit, and social insensitivity, we may be guilty of 'throwing the baby with the bath water' – that is, an implied acceptance of an anti-intellectualism which rejects the values of the academic ethos associated

with a humane liberal education. This sadly is often an oft noted sequel to the transition from an elite university education to mass higher education.

What we, therefore, need in restructuring higher education in Sri Lanka is to be able to affirm the unique nature of the *practice* of a university, a practice that requires collegiality, co-operation, and above all, autonomy for the pursuit of ends that are intrinsic to this enterprise — the pursuit of learning, to educate, train and discover new truths. The university, as Shils insists, has no direct role in achieving 'a degree of substantive equality in society' (1975: 27); rather, it is a condition which has to be achieved by other means.

Contrary to those who may think the *idea of a university* and the values of a liberal education as being an irrelevant alien way of thinking - a western imposition, this way of thinking, this approach to learning and knowledge, is also shared by other traditions of learning in non-western cultures. This is perhaps exemplified in Tagore's concept of a university and enshrined in the ideals of *Shantiniketan* (Sen, 2005). This is particularly true of societies like Sri Lanka, which have been heavily influenced by Buddhist cultural values. These cultures share much in common with the tradition of free and critical inquiry normally associated with a liberal education and in particular, the *idea of a university* which after all has been central to the western intellectual tradition of a liberal education. For example, the injunction, 'think for yourself and do not take things on authority', which is, as Minogue (1973) observes, a frequent utterance of teachers in the western tradition of learning is also characteristic of Buddhist thinking (Jayasuriya, 1997).

These Buddhist sentiments indicate a rationalist approach to knowledge which enshrines freedom of thought and an attitude of critical inquiry. Numerous scholars have drawn pointed attention to the similarity of discourse between Western intellectual tradition, the scientific ethos and Buddhist thought (Thouless, 1962; Fromm, 1955; Jayatilleke, 1988). Both systems of thought are committed to dispassionate scrutiny of evidence, challenging tradition and

authority under the careful guidance of a teacher, who in the true sense of the word is not a preacher of dogma or edicts.

Clearly, the spirit of freedom, the notion of man in a free society underlines both systems of thought, and in particular, man's freedom which is the essence of human nature, is firmly located in the notion of individual sovereignty. Indeed, 'if the ideal of the dignity and worth of the individual' (Gardiner, 1966) is the single most important conception in western liberalism and in liberal education - this is certainly also true of Buddhist thinking which subscribes to a philosophy of individualism and scientific humanism, deeply ingrained in western liberal thought (Jayasuriya, 1997). The universities of Sri Lanka may well have erred greatly in not having been able to communicate this culture of learning to an important segment of the university, its students. The irony is that for many of us, and also for someone like Gandhi, the discovery of the East has been through the West (Thomas Merton, 1964). This only serves to highlight the futility of narrowly sectarian ways of thinking which are distasteful to good scholarship and learning - the hallmarks of a *good* university.

## Conclusion

Sri Lankan higher education which includes the universities, needs to be re-structured and re-oriented to meet new needs and demands — those of a knowledge-based global economy, the imperatives of a fast and changing national environment and the changing nature of knowledge itself. Above all, it is time to revisit and reclaim the early ideals of university education which were dominant in the 1950s and 1960s. In doing so, the universities must be given their proper place as institutions with a distinct culture which are capable of offering things which they alone can achieve, such as the conservation and generation of new knowledge. The university is, indeed, a special kind of place, and needs to be differentiated functionally by its distinctive character, and co-

ordinated with other segments to constitute an integrated and coherent system of higher education.

In this reconceptualisation, one needs to reclaim the '*idea of a university*', and resist pressures towards a blatant utilitarianism which fosters only that which is considered useful. It is as well to remember that even Newman himself, the archdeacon of the elite university, did not disparage the practical or the 'mechanical arts' as he terms these activities. It is more a question of how the practical, the applied disciplines, are taught. Within a university they are taught with a view to making students understand the subject, and not as packaged knowledge, as a set of techniques or skills, theory and praxis go together. Hence, given that the academic and the practical are equally vital for the well-being of a society, there needs to be a careful deployment of resources to sustain both the academic and the practical in the larger interests of society.

There is certainly a developmental role for the university and a need to articulate a social purpose, but the raison d'être for its existence in a civilized democratic society lies in the liberal values of freedom, intellectual tolerance, critical inquiry, humanism and the 'capacity for human awakening' (Maritain, 1962), in short, an ability to use one's mind, to think and generate a sense of understanding and reflection, all of which are enriching and liberating. As Chomsky (1973) puts it, the legacy of a liberal education to which the university is heir is 'unending vigilance ... to a free marketplace of ideas' (Chomsky, 1973: 99); and also a preparedness to resist 'the temptation to conform unthinkingly to the prevailing ideology and to the existing patterns of power and privilege' (Chomsky, 1973: 90). The university must always be a sanctuary for dissent, a refuge for iconoclasts, and above all, a strategic gatekeeper to the world culture of scientific humanism.

There can be no sense of a *university* education which does not recognise its global commitment to a world culture - the preservation of basic human values and willingness to espouse ideals and goals which override the

narrow social and political goals of individual nations. In the words of Gandhi, 'no nation can find its own salvation by breaking away from others'; and what is more, he adds that 'the culture of all lands [needs] to be blown ... as freely as possible' (quoted in Rolland, 1924: 82-83). We need, therefore, to affirm our commitment to universal moral principles, especially the freedom to pursue the truth and values of the intellectual community at large. In the words of Chomsky (1973), it is the responsibility of intellectuals to speak the truth and to expose lies.

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**Notes**

1. In a personal submission to the University of Colombo (Arts Teachers Association University Ceylon, Colombo, 1971), it was pointed out that, on balance, the ill effects of such a policy on the well-being of society are so far reaching and wide ranging that it may be desirable in the short term to have to live with the lesser of two evils - the adverse effects of educational inequality, rather than that of 'positive discrimination'.

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