

PROFESSIONALISM IN ACADEMIA The Role of University Teachers in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Universities in Sri Lanka are facing radical expansion and changes. The increasing numbers of students entering the country's limited universities mandate a higher calibre of professionalism among the academic staff.

The country's academics, however, face several problems that hinder professional development. The majority of the teaching load is carried by senior and probationary lecturers, thereby limiting their potential for personal development through research and publications. A dearth of qualified teachers signifies that only a limited number of students receive quality education. Furthermore, there is an uneven distribution of academic staff within the country's universities. The result is a convergence of students, funding, and resources on only a select few universities.

While Sri Lanka's free education system can and should be considered a national asset, more needs to be done to ensure that the standards of the country's higher education institutions remain competitive in a global context. A motivated and productive teaching staff will lead to effective learning by the students, which then will lead to a qualified and valuable workforce.

This article begins by analyzing the role of teachers in Sri Lanka's higher education system. It then considers certain universal, professional standards of university teaching that should be employed to enhance the quality of education students receive. Finally, several recommendations are offered for broad changes to organizational structures and traditional practices that relate to the professional development of academics.

INTRODUCTION

A professional, by definition, is someone who is able to deal with the challenges and tasks that are specific to the job that he/she performs, using skills, experience, and expertise, which are also unique to his or her job. "Professions are distinguished from other occupations or livelihoods by the oath taken by those who participate as members of a profession"

(Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, & Prescott, 2002). Becoming self-aware of the relevant professional status is something that must be learned by anyone aspiring to be a professional in the workplace. A set of characteristics of a profession can be reasonably and readily identified (Webb, 2002), and several characteristics help define professionalism: the possession and use of specialized knowledge, a long period of training and socialization into the attitudes and behaviours expected of that particular group, and the use of discretion and professional judgment where members of the profession have discretion and make value judgments rather than simply applying rules to a routine set of circumstances (Brown et al 2002). Being a part of a specific profession also implies that members of that profession have the ultimate authority to establish expectations and evaluate their profession's contribution to society (Bruhn et al., 2002).

Along with other occupations, university teaching is often considered a profession or a form of professional expertise widely recognized as a type of reflective practice. Although it has long been a profession, the debate surrounding professionalism is relatively recent. With the advancement of the global economy and the exchange of skills, the economic importance of education has been rediscovered as a key form of productive capital. The new growth theory highlights the role of education in producing human capital and new knowledge (Peters & Roberts, 2000). Consequently, the dominant paradigm in academic staff development emphasizes the practice and perfection where teaching has become a significant focus in higher education.

It is widely recognized that the current decade has been a period of expansion and reform for higher education. Ten years ago, university education was viewed as being paralyzed, under-funded, and lacking public prestige. Today, the discussions are centred on the modernization of higher education, its contribution to economic development, and a greater emphasis has been placed on quality over access. Therefore, the structure and dynamics of the higher education system have certainly changed, placing on the university academia a greater and wider challenge. Now, university teachers are responsive to the moral and intellectual demands society places upon them.

This paper begins with a critical description of the role of university teachers in Sri Lanka, highlighting the distribution of academic staff and their strengths, using the most recent statistics. The universal professional standards within the context of higher education are then discussed in detail. The third section outlines selected methods to be enforced in Sri Lanka in order to promote the professional development of the academia.

THE ROLE OF UNIVERSITY TEACHERS IN SRILANKA

Higher education is a great national asset. Teaching in institutions of higher education is now being championed in a way that it never was previously. As a result, its contribution to the economic and social well-being of the nation is of vital importance. As a profession, higher education teaching represents a distinctive discourse. We would expect staff of higher education institutions to have specialized knowledge and high levels of qualification in their own subject areas, but this does not necessarily mandate a detailed understanding of pedagogical theories and the practice of learning. While teaching is one of the main activities of a university teacher, career promotion is based upon research activity and/or administrative responsibility. Excellence in teaching is taken for granted, rarely acknowledged, and even more rarely rewarded (Nixon, 1996).

In Sri Lanka, teaching is vitally important, and quality teaching is a responsibility and condition of employment for every faculty member. As professionals, teachers are obliged to provide students with the best educational experiences and to function at the forefront of teaching as well as research. Academic staff members in universities are expected to have a role in both teaching and research. Teaching development has traditionally been considered an individual matter and academics are assumed to relate their roles through practice. In fulfilling this teaching role, academic staff members are expected to perform certain maintenance functions, for example, facilitating learning, assessing students, advising students, and managing courses.

In the context of the academic profession, Sri Lanka has experienced important changes in three basic concepts: growth, upgrading, and evaluation. As of 2005, 15 universities, seven post graduate institutions, and nine higher educational institutions (University Grants Commission, 2005) were contributing to Sri Lanka's higher education system, which served 63,355 students.

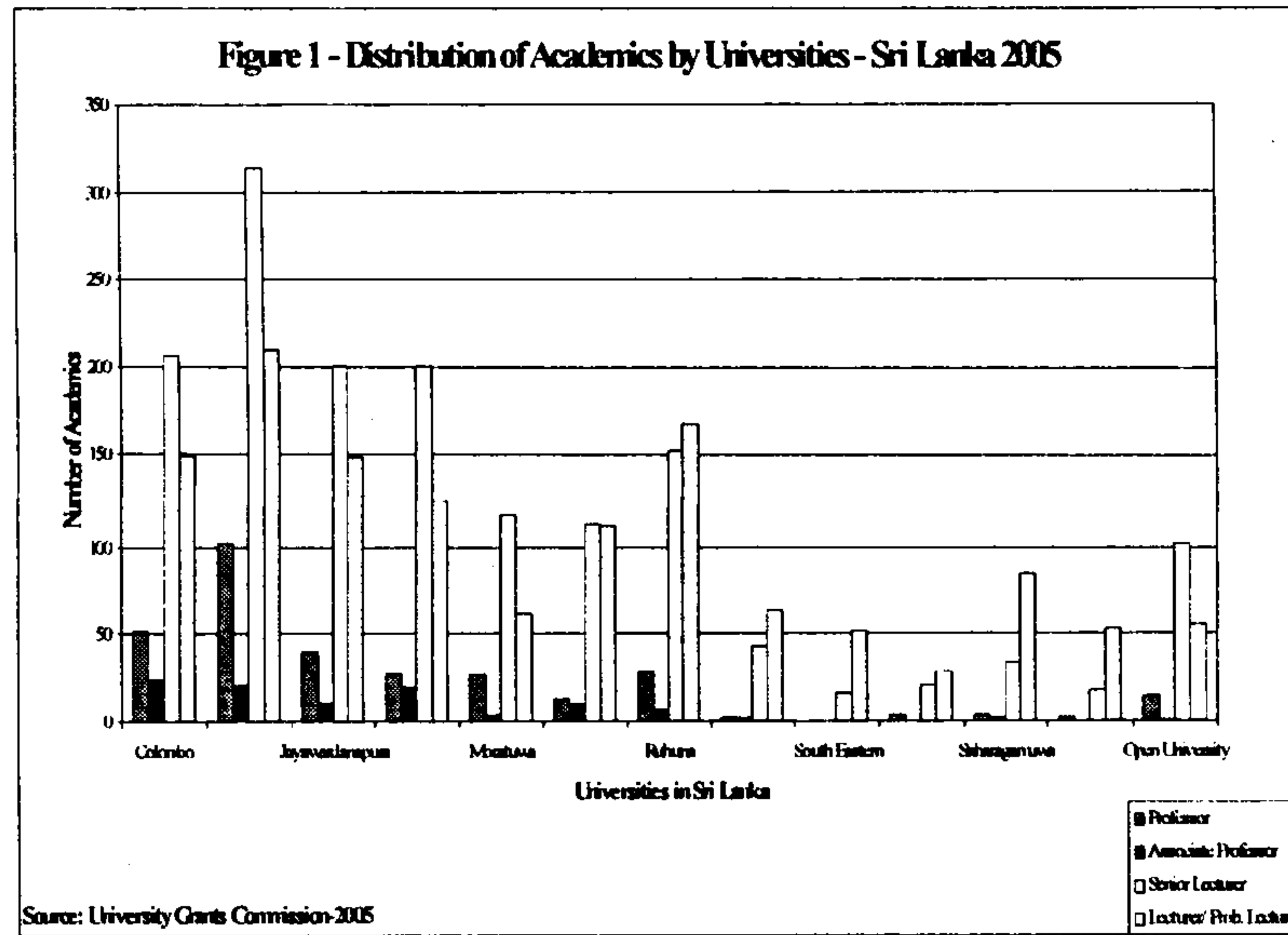
Table 1 - Teaching Strength by Universities

| Name of the University | Profess -or | Associate Professor | Senior Lecture -r | Lecturer/ Prob. Lecturer | Total |
|------------------------|----------------|------------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------------|-------|
| Colombo | 52 | 24 | 206 | 149 | 431 |
| Peradeniya | 101 | 21 | 314 | 210 | 646 |
| Jayawardanapura | 40 | 11 | 201 | 148 | 400 |
| Kelaniya | 28 | 20 | 201 | 125 | 374 |
| Moratuwa | 27 | 4 | 118 | 62 | 211 |
| Jaffna | 13 | 10 | 112 | 111 | 246 |
| Ruhuna | 29 | 6 | 153 | 168 | 356 |
| Eastern | 2 | 2 | 43 | 64 | 111 |
| South Eastern | 0 | 0 | 16 | 52 | 68 |
| Rajarata | 4 | | 21 | 29 | 54 |
| Sabaragamuwa | 4 | 2 | 34 | 84 | 124 |
| Wayamba | 3 | 0 | 18 | 53 | 74 |
| Open University | 14 | 1 | 101 | 56 | 172 |
| Total | 317 | 101 | 1538 | 1311 | 3267 |

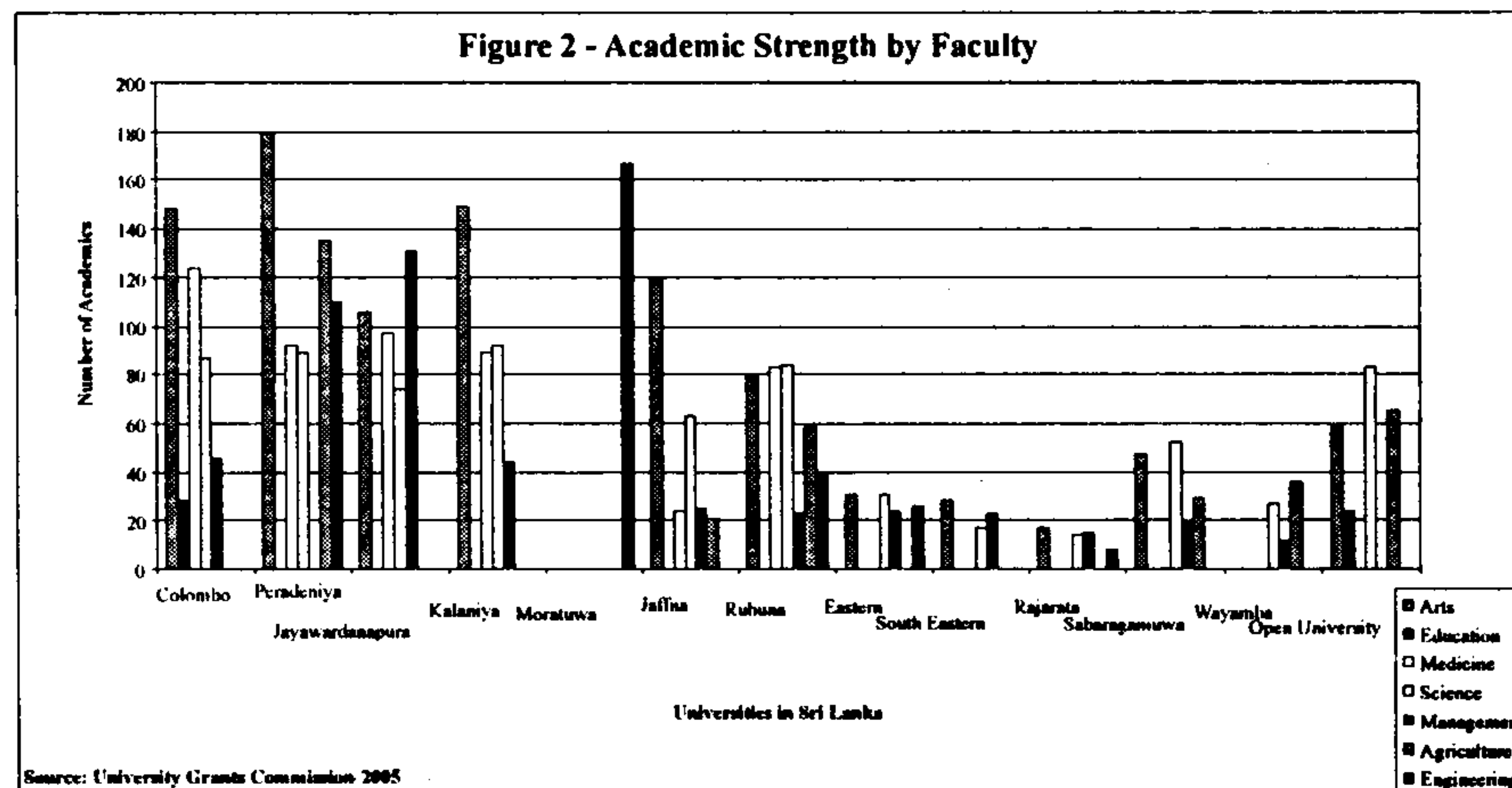
Source: University Grants Commission Report, January 2005

The statistics indicate that the enrolment of students had increased by 50% since 1995. Table 1 outlines the professional capacity of the university staff in Sri Lankan universities. Although the University Grants Commission report identifies a total of 15 universities, the statistics on the teaching staff are available for only the 13 universities listed above, excluding Uva Wellassa University and the University of Visual and Performing Arts.

The above Table also indicates that 1,538 academics (47%) of the university staff were ranked as senior lecturers while 1,311 academics (40%) held the lecturer/probationary lecturer status. Professors and associate professors accounted for only 13% of the total strength. This indicates that the main role of teaching is carried out by senior and probationary lecturers, leaving these academics little to no time for research or any other activities that may contribute to the development of the country.



Different features of academic staff are crucial in any consideration of professional development (Cannon, 1983). Figure 1 indicates the uneven distribution of the academic staff in Sri Lankan universities. Latest statistics indicate that, overall, there are 411 departments in 77 faculties served by 3,267 teachers. This is a ratio of five departments to one faculty (5:1) with eight academic staff members for one department (8:1). Student enrolment, as indicated in Figure 2, is highest in the arts, management, science, and engineering faculties. Since there are no definite prescriptions for good teaching, educational effectiveness depends on the professionalism, experience, and the commitment of the academic staff.



According to Piper (1994), the role of a university teacher is Janus-faced: “academics look to their occupation for their identity as teachers, but outside for their identity as subject specialists.” This dual professional identity is becoming increasingly difficult to sustain due to the level of organizational structure in Sri Lankan universities. Figure 2 indicates the academic strength of each university. Faculties of arts, science, and medicine have attracted the majority of the teachers while faculties such as agriculture, education, and management have drawn fewer academics. Due to lack of facilities and specialized areas of study, students have chosen the most popular areas where teaching staff are mostly available. This organizational structure of the Sri Lankan university system has diminished the level of professional practice and the conditions of academic work.

Figure 2 further delineates the level of faculty specialization within and among universities, resulting from the measurement of the professional status of different faculties in each university. Henkel (2001) indicated that prior to 1992, universities assumed that being an academic meant combining research, teaching, and administration, even though most placed a greater emphasis on research. But in Sri Lanka, the identity of probationary lecturers and senior lecturers has centred on the teaching role. The continued pressure to acquire a reputation in their field through publications and other forms of self-presentation and focused connection is popular among top-level academics.

Within the Sri Lankan university system, the role of academics as researchers is becoming increasingly differentiated from the practice of teaching, mainly due to the changing pattern of student intake and the increasing teaching load. As a result, academic staff members are being further fragmented, causing considerable tension among them. Although academics can influence the processes of research, there are only few structures in place to support their own professional development as researchers. However, with Sri Lankan university teachers involved in various aspects of social, economic, and cultural events, projects, or ventures, the potential for contributing to society at local, regional, and national levels is increasing.

UNIVERSAL PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS IN UNIVERSITY TEACHING

For young people, universities are a vital gateway to opportunity and fulfilment. They provide the highest levels of education available, insist on their own excellence in teaching and research, and demand of both their staff and their students the highest standards. All students have the potential to learn field-specific knowledge and achieve high standards.

Therefore, it is a widely accepted fact that there is a need for greater attention to making the university environment more receptive to professional ideas.

To achieve a high standard of education, many developed countries have designed professional teaching standards that reflect learning goals and academic standards of individual universities. The primary belief in creating the foundation of these standards is that the environment should nurture the talents and creativity of students, and understand, respect, and incorporate their experiences into the learning process. The major areas of universal professional teaching standards can be highlighted as follows (Cannon, 1983):

- (1) Content Knowledge
- (2) Human Development and Learning
- (3) Planning for Instruction
- (4) Learning Environment
- (5) Instructional Delivery
- (6) Communication
- (7) Professional Conduct and Leadership
- (8) Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

These areas of teaching standards explain the basic requirements for professional standards for teachers in universities as a whole. However, there are no universally-recognized professional standards for teachers in the university system. The reason may be that university teachers must use discretion and their professional judgment in areas such as curriculum design, delivery, student support, and particularly assessment. This shows the levels of autonomy of the teachers. Therefore, the standards vary from one institution to the next. The above areas are presented as common requirements to be met by any university system.

Standard one, the content of knowledge, suggests that the teacher understands the central concepts, methods of inquiry, and structures of the disciplines, and creates learning experiences that make the content meaningful to all students. The second standard proposes that learning opportunities should support the intellectual, social, and personal development of all students. Instructional planning and designs are based upon knowledge of the discipline, the students, the community, and the curriculum goals. Understanding individual and group motivation, and behaviour required to create a positive learning environment; encourages positive interaction, active engagement in learning, and self-motivation, which help achieve a better classroom environment.

Further, using a variety of institutional strategies to encourage students' development of critical thinking, problem solving, and performance skills reflect the knowledge indicators of the teaching performance standard. Using the knowledge of effective writing, verbal, nonverbal, and visual communication techniques to foster active inquiry, collaboration, and supportive interaction supports the teaching standard of communication within the university system. The area of professional conduct and leadership helps to improve student learning and well-being. Continuing professional development is an important indicator of professionalism. As effective professionals, university teachers should keep themselves current in their subject areas. They need to reflect on their own performance in a continuous process of personal review and evaluation, leading to further planning and implementation. They are lifelong learners who need to be active in their own personal and professional development.

The probation or tenure process is another standard measure of the university teaching system. It imposes great responsibilities upon everyone involved in making these decisions. The primary evaluation by the faculty of the academic unit is supplemented by those of the dean of the faculty, college or school, the vice chancellor, president, or the provost on behalf of the central administration, and finally by the Board of Trustees (University Council). Universities have formal procedures governing their recruitment and promotion review process. In addition, each faculty and department or academic unit may define what it expects of a faculty member in terms of teaching, research, and service. Clearly, these judgments have to be based upon information and evidence that are relevant to the duties, responsibilities, and achievements of the faculty member being evaluated.

In relation to the Australian system, there were many attempts to improve the quality of university teaching. The disquiet about the quality of teaching has been expressed by governments, committees of enquiry, students, and academics. However, Cannon (1983) states that there is no well-formulated theory for professional development. As a result, the universal professional standards in universities have different phases around the world.

Further, Cannon (1983) explored some of the reasons for the inadequacies of university teaching in the Australian university system. He stated that the characteristics, attitudes, and work patterns of academic staff were understood imperfectly and that the forces of change to improve teaching had been weak. He suggested that the internal complexity of universities needs to be considered in formulating strategies for better teaching methods. In the United Kingdom, for at least 20 years, universities have been offering a range of developmental activities for staff that teach and

support learning. The Institute of Learning and Teaching (ILT) was set up to enhance the status of teaching, to improve the teaching experience, and to support innovation in higher education.

ADAPTATION AND METHODS OF ENFORCEMENT FOR SRI LANKA

Universities are distinctive and complex organizations, and all students are entitled to be taught well and to be given the support they need to learn effectively. The choice of the students is becoming an increasingly important driver of teaching quality. Therefore, the adaptation and methods of enforcement are to be supported by clear expectations about the standards that every university must meet so that no student has to tolerate poor teaching. Therefore, higher education must be active-oriented rather than attendance-oriented.

The challenge facing Sri Lankan university education must be understood in terms of the following:

- (1) The dramatic expansion in student numbers over the recent past resulting in a reduction in the unit of resource
- (2) Consequent changes in the curriculum, teaching, and assessment
- (3) Changes in the conditions of academic work

These factors have resulted in the university system having to undergo a series of complex, overlapping changes, which are profoundly affecting its organizational structures and its traditional practices, especially for those who work within the system and in the public eye. With exclusive undergraduate focus, universities in Sri Lanka have failed to develop centres of excellence in teaching, learning, and research. Most of the postgraduate programs, particularly in the fields of arts, social sciences, and humanities, initiated in many universities are evening or weekend courses that have not been granted legitimacy by the mainstream system. In the absence of full-time postgraduate teaching and research faculty members, and poor library facilities, the country's universities have not been provided with adequate infrastructure to provide new knowledge or disseminate quality knowledge (Uyangoda, 2002). Through their command of discrete expertise, academics can largely influence the processes of both research and teaching, but the lack of adequate support for their own professional development limits their success.

The probation/tenure period can be considered an opportunity to gauge meaningfully a faculty member's progress in achieving excellence in teaching. Hence, universities have addressed the procedures and practices used to evaluate the contributions of a faculty member's teaching as a part

of the tenure review process. The University Grants Commission has recently introduced staff training programmes for probationary lecturers through Staff Development Units set up within universities but has been unable to continue effectively due to lack of financial and human resources, and the heavy workload assigned to probationary lecturers by their respective departments. However, there is the need to establish a climate for consistent and regular appraisal and rewarding of teaching throughout a faculty member's career in Sri Lankan universities. Towards this end, the following methods are proposed for the professional development of academics.

Quality Assurance

At present, there are no nationally-recognized professional standards for university teachers, and many of them have never received any formal training in pedagogy. The quality assurance programme introduced by the University Grants Commission is still in its early stages. The need now is for the programme to be expanded on an individual university basis and strengthened with adequate facilities such as the necessary human resource training. To maintain the standards of the teaching staff, it is necessary to perform quality assurance through an assessment of teaching that utilizes subject reviews, enabling poor performance to be identified and eliminated.

Rewards for Excellence

Professors and instructors who teach outstandingly well and maintain superior standards should be rewarded. Unlike many countries around the world, Sri Lanka's educational system does not embrace such practices of acknowledging teaching excellence. Rewards, in this country, materialize in the form of promotions. However, suitable rewards for teaching should be carried out after proper assessment. For example, in almost all universities in the United States, outstanding teachers are honoured each year with a "Distinguished Teaching Award." Teachers who are considered for this award are nominated by the students based on their teaching and their impact on students' life experiences. There must be clear and visible rewards for the best in order to instil good practices throughout the system in addition to sending important signals both to students and institutions about the value of teaching in its own right. Regular and continuous performance appraisal of teachers by the students, as practiced by many university systems around the world, could be used to offer rewards for excellence in teaching in Sri Lankan universities provided the practice is adapted to suit the academic culture in our Universities. For example student evaluations may be supplemented with peer evaluations.

Fair Pay in Higher Education

If university teachers are to deliver high quality services, it is essential that institutions are able to retain staff of high calibre. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to address issues of recruitment and retention, staff and management development, equal opportunities, rewarding of good performance, and the reduction of poor performance. This process will help to modernize human resource management in higher education, allowing institutions to play their strengths and reward excellence. It is also necessary to implement better and higher salaries as well as clearer distinctions for rewarding teachers who teach well.

Best Practices in Teaching and Research

It is necessary to foster an environment of continuous improvement in the development of university teaching by establishing centres for teaching excellence. The creation of special centres at universities, whose task is to help improve the quality of teaching, will help foster best practices in teaching while also help raising the standard of teaching. It will create a common platform for bringing together new ideas in teaching methods to support the continuous professional development of teaching staff by sponsoring and developing good practices, setting professional standards, accrediting training, conducting research, and helping policy formulation on teaching and learning. Practices and methods for promoting research excellence are inadequate in many faculties within the Sri Lankan academia mainly due to the inadequacy of funding. In addition to individual research of university academics, it is also necessary to create an environment that offers opportunities for university professionals to take part in different research activities to continuously improve the research culture within the universities. Promoting regular research sessions at institutional, national and international levels, supporting distinguished scholar exchange programmes and establishing partnerships with international universities, research institutions, and the industry are some of the essential elements that could be incorporated into Sri Lankan academic institutions to improve excellence in research. While some of these activities are currently underway many of them are implemented on an *ad hoc* basis. What is important is to mainstream them in the university system.

Performance Evaluation and Assessment

The evaluation of teaching is rarely carried out in Sri Lankan universities with the adequate degree of thoroughness or rigor. It is necessary to begin to correct this situation. Adaptation of methods to assess and evaluate academics and the course curricula is of vital importance in maintaining the quality of university education. Measuring and recording achievements through objective indicators, peer reviews, and guided

qualitative judgments are methods that need to be incorporated in to the Sri Lankan university system. However, assessing individual performance is only one component of standards; at least as important are standards at the departmental and institutional levels. The primary focus on experience is consistent both with academic values and with research.

Institutional Effectiveness

In addition to the evaluation of professionals on an individual basis, there needs to be an overall program within each higher education facility to assess the effectiveness of the institution and its academic goals. Such a program should create a sense of ownership of the institution's mission among all faculty and staff. The unit responsible for institutional effectiveness should be given the authority to allocate resources for monitoring the continuous progress of academic and administrative development (Weiss, 2000).

CONCLUSION

There are no universal professional standards in university teaching. But the challenges are clear. There is a real need to maintain the professional status of university teaching to produce a more productive generation. Professionalism in academia implies a commitment to good practice in all aspects of program design and delivery. It suggests a strong commitment to students' learning, achievement, and adherence to appropriate professional values. Students would benefit from effective teaching, adequate training, and adoption of best practices to improve the quality of teaching. Universities in Sri Lanka are changing radically. There are more students, less resources, increasing debate around standards and effectiveness of teaching, and new challenges to be met in a rapidly changing socio-economic-political milieu. The whole enterprise of professional development is linked with the internal and external environments of universities. Therefore, strengthening relationships within and between internal environments of universities will support the quality of university teaching.

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