

2. THE AMALGAMATION AND DECENTRALISATION OF UNIVERSITIES IN SRI LANKA*

Introduction

The central issue of this case is decentralisation versus centralisation. What is the point at which the successful implementation of one system as opposed to another can be achieved? What are the appropriate conditions? What are the factors giving choice? Who decides? Should it be politicians or academicians? The Sri Lankan experience seems to suggest neither. What are the benefits and weaknesses of each system as exemplified in this case? Such issues are highlighted in this case as are the human problems and human ingenuity which such organisational changes promote.

The Case Study

The two most important landmarks in the history of university education in Sri Lanka, other than the setting up of the University of Ceylon in 1942, were the amalgamation of the existing universities in 1972 to form a unified federal structure and the decentralisation of the University of Sri Lanka in 1979 to form autonomous universities with a University Grants Commission to carry out functions far more than the disbursement of funds.

This study will describe the factors leading to the amalgamation of the then existing universities in 1972, and then the decentralisation of the federal university in 1979 to form six autonomous universities.

Historical Background

Though the Ceylon Medical College was in existence from the latter part of the nineteenth century, university education as such began in January 1921 when the University College was formally opened in Colombo as a government institution affiliated to London University. The University College was transformed into the University of Ceylon in July 1942 by the Ceylon University Ordinance No. 20 of 1942, after a certain amount of struggle on the part of the Western educated elite, with the help of some of the British Governors and the principal of the University College. One University of Ceylon was established by this Ordinance by amalgamating the existing Ceylon Medical College and the University College.

The University of Ceylon continued as the only university in Sri Lanka until 1959 when the Bandaranaike Government upgraded two great seats of Buddhist learning to establish two other universities, the Universities of Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara.

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The United National Party which came into power in 1965 effected a further change in the system in 1966. With the passing of the Higher Education Act No. 20 of 1966, a National Council for Higher Education was established to oversee the functioning of the universities. This body was like a University Grants Commission, but had a little more power. In 1967, the University of Ceylon was split in two to form two separate universities, so that there were four universities in all. This position continued until February 1972.

The Amalgamation

All political parties were preparing for the general election in 1970. The Sri Lanka Freedom Party, led by Mrs Sirimavo Bandaranaike (which was in opposition), had, in their election manifesto, outlined the changes they would effect in the field of higher education if they came to power.

The advisors to the SLFP on higher education had drawn up a blueprint to achieve economies in higher education and to do away with the National Council for Higher Education which was considered an enigma as it controlled all the actions of the universities. The chairman of the NCHE was a former professor of Pali, Professor G P Malalasekera. There were six other members of the Council, most of whom were well-known educationalists, from various fields of education. The former Vice-Chancellors of the universities also participated in the meetings of the NCHE.

The main reasons for a desire to effect a change in the higher educational set up were the attempts to achieve economies by rationalisation of courses, more than the dictatorial attitude of the NCHE and reductions in staff, etc. As soon as the SLFP assumed control of the reins of government after the election, a committee was appointed by the Minister of Education to study the existing set up and make recommendations which would help to achieve the desired goals.

The committee consisted entirely of university teachers from various disciplines ranging from medicine and engineering to eastern history and they were drawn from all the universities and the College of Technology. The committee held sittings and recorded evidence, both oral and written (submissions), for almost one year and they drew up the plan for a unification or amalgamation of the universities to form a single federal university.

The committee recommended the establishment of a single university based on the pattern of the University of London. There was to be a Senate House at the centre with the Vice-Chancellor at the helm, and the existing universities would be the campuses of the university. Each of the campuses were to have a President as the head, but responsible to the Vice-Chancellor. With the establishment of the single university the committee

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envisaged achieving economies by cutting down on the staff, for now there was no need to have a Vice-Chancellor in each campus; rationalisation of courses to avoid duplication; and creating centres of excellence in various disciplines in the various campuses. Of course, economies could have been achieved if the university had been established and everything else done as recommended by the committee, but unfortunately, in reality, these things are never achieved.

The Government accepted the recommendations of the committee in principle, and went ahead with the drafting of legislation for the establishment of the single university. The passage of the legislation through the House of Parliament, and the receipt of the assent of the Governor-General to the University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972, brought about the amalgamation of the existing universities into a single university and this higher education setting was established on 15 February 1972. The new university comprised a Senate House as the Vice Chancellor's Office, and the former universities formed campuses subordinate to the Senate House with a President as the head of each campus. The College of Technology was absorbed as the fifth campus.

Results of the Amalgamation

It is of interest to note that with the establishment of the single university, all but one of the members who served on the committee were appointed Presidents of the campuses. The other person was appointed as the first Registrar of the University of Sri Lanka.

How far were the factors envisaged by the committee achieved in reality? In respect of rationalisation very little was achieved. The departments of education in the Peradeniya, Vidyodaya and Vidyalankara campuses were brought to the Colombo campus and a faculty of education was established in 1976, almost four years after the university was established. Some of the teachers were transferred against their wishes, for, those who were in the Peradeniya campus enjoyed housing facilities and better medical facilities and, therefore, did not want to leave that campus. This was achieved during the tenure of the second Vice-Chancellor.

The first Vice-Chancellor was able to bring about only a very mild form of rationalisation. It was not exactly rationalisation, but creation of centres of excellence in the various campuses in respect of various disciplines. The centre of excellence for languages was created at the Vidyalankara campus, and most of the teachers in the departments of languages were transferred to that campus. Here, too, some of the teachers were transferred under protest for the same reasons cited earlier.

In most of the disciplines there was absolutely no rationalisation, even as a public relations gesture. What happened was the opposite. There was duplication of certain disciplines and more than duplication of others, since the campuses did not want to lose what they already had and they opposed any disciplines being taken away from them. Instead, what the campuses wanted was

to expand and obtain disciplines that they did not have.

So, it is evident that the rationalisation of courses did not work as planned and, therefore, it was not able to achieve the economies of having fewer teachers and maximum utilisation of scarce resources. Instead, what happened was that some of the departments in the campuses expanded and had a larger number of staff members than before.

Neither were economies achieved in respect of the top level staff. Though there was only one Vice-Chancellor, the Presidents of the campuses were also drawing the same salary as the Vice-Chancellor and, therefore, there was one person extra at this level than with the previous system. There was only one Registrar for the whole University of Sri Lanka, but the campuses had additional Registrars, so that in that category too, there was one person additional to the cadre than in the previous system.

The Act of Parliament which established the single university determined the structure of the university, gave it legitimacy and indicated how vital matters such as the control of the university, the authority, rights and responsibilities of different governing bodies at different levels were determined.

The federation was created to achieve two main objectives: to reduce the expenditure on university education, and to rationalise courses. Both were economic reasons. It was found that having more universities meant higher costs in respect of governing boards and staff. If many of the matters could be handled by a central office, the staff (non-academic) in the campuses could be reduced in number.

There was also more than duplication of courses because often, three of the four universities had the same courses. It was planned to avoid this by rationalisation and this would result in the reduction of the academic staff needed and thereby achieve economies.

It was also felt that having one central body controlling all activities of the campuses would result in uniformity in all campuses with regard to all examinations, curricula and admissions, and in respect of appointments and promotion of staff (both academic as well as non-academic).

It was felt that the costs would be reduced considerably with central control since the government grant was distributed among the campuses according to student numbers and the capital vote according to the priorities. Once disbursed, the central body was responsible for seeing that the monies granted were spent according to plan.

The central body was responsible for maintaining standards of all examinations in the campuses through a system of examination boards. The curricula of all campuses were decided at the centre by Boards of Study, so that throughout the campuses the standards were maintained on a uniform basis. All admissions of students to the various faculties in the campuses

were determined by the Admissions Committee at the Centre.

Under the earlier organisational management some universities were not in a position to recruit the best graduates to the academic staff because some universities were considered inferior to others established earlier. So, they had to be content with personnel with poorer qualifications. With the establishment of the single university all appointments had to be sanctioned by the central governing authority, the Board of Governors. This prevented campuses from recruiting personnel with poorer qualifications, and also the competition among campuses to recruit staff was eliminated.

The unified university did not live up to expectations because, as two of the campuses were situated far away from the centre in Colombo, it meant that the administration became unwieldy. Senate House was not able to have great control over all the activities, and some matters were necessarily attended to by the campuses without reference to the Senate House.

The campuses were also dissatisfied with the system, complaining that there were long delays in the implementation of certain decisions, and that the senate was indifferent to the campuses.

On the other hand, when problems arose, it was a question of passing responsibility between the Senate House and the campuses. Inability to put an end to problems as soon as they occurred led to student unrest, a strike and demonstrations, violence and destruction of university property on many campuses on a number of occasions. This resulted in the removal of a President in one instance and the killing of a student in another, followed by the closure of the university and the appointment of Commissions of Inquiry.

One salient feature in this federal structure was that the Act was not enforced. The Board of Governors met only as an Advisory Board of Governors and the Senate was never established. The Vice-Chancellor was all-powerful - he reigned over his kingdom during a transition period extending to almost seven years. He had to carry out the directions of the Minister from time to time or sacrifice his position.

These shortcomings led to agitation among the staff in the campuses for a change. The agitation was so widespread that some of the political parties had changes to be effected in the higher education system embodied in their election manifesto. The UNP, in its election manifesto for the general election in 1977, had indicated that it would set up once again fully autonomous independent universities in place of the existing campuses.

Decentralisation

A former professor in one of the campuses, who was holding a professional appointment in a foreign university, was appointed by the President of the Republic to make recommendations regarding the new system to be established. He interviewed representatives of various associations,

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individuals, considered written submissions, and submitted his recommendations to the Minister for Education. The recommendations were accepted by the Government, which set about drafting the legislation for the purpose.

The Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 established the new university education structure on 1 January 1979, thus repealing the University of Ceylon Act No. 1 of 1972. The former campuses were made independent universities. A University Grants Commission was established to oversee the work of the universities. Though the UGC was based on its counterpart in the United Kingdom, it actually resembled the UGC in Britain only in nomenclature.

The autonomous universities were established. However, the limitations of the universities with regard to certain functions were laid down by law itself.

It would be worthwhile to compare the powers of the UGC vis à vis the universities, as laid down by the Act of Parliament establishing these institutions. Section 15 of the Act specifies the powers of the UGC as follows:

1. to inquire into or investigate, from time to time, the financial needs of each higher educational institution;
2. to prepare from time to time, in consultation with the governing authority of each higher educational institution, triennial budgets for its maintenance and development; or for any other general or special purpose;
3. to make recommendations from time to time to the Minister as to the nature and amount of grants, out of public funds, which it is desirable or necessary to make to each of the universities;
4. to determine from time to time, within the overall wage and salary policies of the Government, the quantum of remuneration that should be paid to different grades of the staff of the higher educational institutions; and the nature and extent of other benefits that the staff should receive;
5. to determine, in consultation with the governing authority of each university, the courses which should be provided therein, and the degrees, diplomas, and other academic distinctions which shall be awarded;
6. to determine, from time to time, in consultation with each university, the total number of students which shall be admitted annually to each university and the apportionment of that number to the different courses of study therein;

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7. to select students for admission to each university, in consultation with an admissions committee;
8. to determine, in consultation with each university, the external examinations which it should conduct for enabling those who are not students of the university to obtain degrees, diplomas, and other academic distinctions of the university;
9. to formulate schemes of recruitment and procedures for appointment of the staff of the universities;
10. to investigate or to cause investigation into such matters pertaining to the discipline of the students of any university, as may be brought to the notice of the UGC by a Vice-Chancellor, and to take remedial measures; and
11. to do any other acts necessary for effectively exercising any of the powers specified by the Act.

The objects of the UGC were specified in section 3 of the Act. The more important ones are as follows:

1. the planning and co-ordination of university education so as to conform to national policy;
2. the apportionment to the universities, of the funds voted by the Parliament in respect of university education; and the control of expenditure by each such university;
3. the maintenance of academic standards in universities;
4. the regulation of the administration of universities;
5. the regulation of the admissions of students to each university.

It would be interesting to note the powers conferred on a university by section 29 of the Act. Section 29 opens with the following proviso: "Subject to the powers, duties and functions of the Commission, a university shall have power ..."

This indeed is an interesting proviso as far as the powers of the universities and the UGC are concerned. Subject to the above proviso, the universities are to enjoy the following powers as provided in the relevant sections of the Act:

1. to admit students and to provide for instruction in any approved branch of learning;
2. to hold examinations for purposes of ascertaining the persons who have acquired proficiency in different branches of learning;

3. to provide postgraduate courses;
4. to grant and confer degrees, diplomas and other academic distinctions to persons who have pursued approved courses of study in the university and who have passed the examinations of the university.
5. to conduct, with the concurrence of the UGC, external examinations for enabling those who are not students of the university, to obtain degrees, diplomas, etc.
6. to institute professorships, etc., as may be required for the purposes of the university.

On the face of it, it seems that the powers, duties and functions of the UGC and the universities are clearly defined by law but, actually, nothing could be done by the universities without obtaining prior approval of the UGC. There have been quite a few instances where the UGC has encroached on the functions of the universities and has dictated terms to the universities. Actually, in the working of the new system, there has not been very much difference between the earlier federal structure, as far as central control is concerned, except for the fact that now there are universities instead of campuses. As in the case of the earlier organisation, all the functions of the universities are being controlled by circular instructions from the UGC.

With the establishment of the new university structure, a new Ministry of Higher Education was created, with the Minister of Education holding this portfolio as well as that of Education. The Secretary to the Ministry was the same person who was functioning as chairman of the UGC. This added more power to the UGC and especially to its chairman. Now the Ministry of Higher Education functions under the President.

The present arrangement has caused most of the university teachers and other employees to be satisfied because there is a great deal more independence now than under the previous set up. The Vice-Chancellors have to take decisions, without passing on responsibility. Therefore, though the expenditure is far greater than earlier, more people are kept satisfied now than under the earlier structure.

A significant feature after the establishment of the autonomous universities was the creation of the Open University in July, 1980 by an Order of the Minister of Higher Education. The Open University of Sri Lanka functions under an Ordinance - the Open University of Sri Lanka Ordinance No. 3 of 1980.

The objectives of the Open University may be indicated as the advancement and dissemination of learning and knowledge by teaching and research, correspondence tuition, residential courses and seminars, and in other relevant ways. It seeks to provide education of university and professional

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standard to its students, to promote the educational well-being of the community generally, and to meet the demand for manpower skills, especially through training at the middle level. The Open University achieves its objectives through programmes at different levels and continuing education programmes. These programmes are being provided using the techniques of distance education through the printed word and through the mass media.

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