A UNIVERSITY GRANTS COMMISSION IN A SOUTH ASIAN SETTING: THE SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

University education in Sri Lanka in modern times has a short history of just over six decades. From 1921 to 1959 there was one University College (1921–1942) or University on the island. With the establishment of two other universities in 1959, the need for co-ordination of higher education activity through a University Grants Commission (UGC) or similar body arose.

The establishment of the National Council of Higher Education (NCHE) in 1966 was part of a policy of bringing greater government influence to bear on universities and was therefore resented and resisted by the latter. However, the new body, while it lasted, served as a very effective buffer against undue government interference in university affairs. The six year period beginning in 1972 saw a process of centralization of university education under strong government control. The UGC established in 1979 has much the same powers as the NCHE, a wider range in fact than those enjoyed by the British UGC, and much greater influence in university education than the British prototype.

Universities in Sri Lanka have always depended on the state for almost all their funds. While this has naturally given government much influence in shaping the structure and expansion of universities, the principle of university autonomy was strongly entrenched between 1942 and 1966. There was a departure from this in 1966, but more particularly between 1972 and 1978. The Universities Act, No. 16 of 1978 re-introduced the concept of autonomous universities. The one area in which state influence has been the predominant factor is university admissions and this influence began in the mid-1950s long before the concept of university autonomy came under systematic attack from the government's Ministry of Education.

The Prelude

The story of Sri Lanka's modern higher education system begins with the University College, established in 1921 in response to a long but sporadic

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agitation in the country [1]. It was affiliated to the University of London. From the outset it was regarded as a half-way house to a national university which was the ultimate objective of those who led the agitation for the establishment of such a university. The transition of this institution into a national university granting its own degrees took all of 21 years. In 1942 the University of Ceylon was established. Its site was at Peradeniya near Kandy, 68 miles from the national capital. The shift to this site from Colombo took more than a decade, and was in several stages. Funds were provided by the Treasury through the Ministry of Education. There was no special administrative unit within that latter Ministry to link it to the University. The only formal link was provided by one of its officials, the Director of Education, the principal administrative officer in control of primary and secondary education in the island's state education sector, who was an ex officio member of the Council, the University's governing body (de Silva, K. M., 1978).

Although the University's dependence on the state for almost all of its funds could have led to demands for state control, or at least to a large measure of influence in the affairs of the University, it was, unlike the University College (1921–42) which it replaced, a genuinely autonomous institution from 1942 to 1966. The concept of an autonomous University found wide acceptance among all sections of political opinion in the country, not least with the main officials of the government and the leading intellectuals and economic figures of Sri Lankan society. Until 1958, when the two main centres of Buddhist learning in Ceylon were converted overnight into universities, it was the only university on the island.

The first Vice-Chancellor was Sir Ivor Jennings, a distinguished British constitutional lawyer and political scientist who had begun his career in Sri Lanka as the principal of University College. In framing the University of Ceylon Ordinance No. 20 of 1942 which established the university as a unitary, residential institution, he incorporated in it the safeguards required to protect its autonomy. Within the university and outside it, his established academic reputation, buttressed by his influence with D. S. Senanayake, the first Prime Minister after the country became independent and whose trusted confidential adviser on constitutional affairs he was, gave Jennings a prestige in the country which none of his successors ever enjoyed. As its first Vice-Chancellor, from 1942 to 1955, he gave the university a style and standing which enabled it to survive with its autonomous status intact, if not entirely inviolate, for a decade after his departure for Cambridge in 1955.

The tendency of the University of Ceylon to regard itself as a training ground for persons who would become members of the leading strata of Sri Lanka society was the inevitable, if not the intended, result of an admissions policy which was conservative if not actually restrictive. However, this was not without benefit to the newly established university, which was given a decade of