

Career Guidance Work in the Universities : Moving Forward 2006 onwards

We believe that Career Guidance work¹ in the Sri Lankan universities has developed in reasonable manner though not necessarily at the same pace all over since the time work was initiated in some universities in 1998. Information on significant events and contributory factors at national level and institutional development at local level were provided in a report dated 1st December 2005 submitted to the UGC (and through it also to the CVCD). There is however no doubt that there is a long way to go if one were to claim one had fully-fledged Careers Services operational.

Whatever development has taken place has received meaningful inputs particularly from leaders in the world of work either individually or through the different Chambers. This has been in the form of continuous interaction, participation in relevant committees, discussions, presentations, workshops, projects, joint activities, and mentoring programmes to name a few.

A significant milestone was reached in February 2003 when the UGC Circular 819 was issued. This was accompanied by a document entitled “Recommendations and Guidelines for the development and institutionalization of Career Guidance Services in the Universities”. The influence and impact therein of a two-day workshop held in August 2001 with the participation of the UGC Standing Committee on Career Guidance in Universities and representatives of the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce is evident.² The key conclusion reached there was that particularly in the current context Higher Education bears a responsibility for producing “Employable Graduates” and that Career Guidance has a critical role to contributing to such and adding value making the graduate employable and competitive.

One notes also that one of the key reasons for issuing the “Recommendations and Guidelines” referred to was to ensure focus, continuity and purposeful development in spite of changes of Directors and of Academic Leadership within Higher Educational Institutions.

Six focal areas were singled out. It was recommended to the Career Guidance Units that one concentrates on at least three activities from among the six indicated which were:

1. Career Counselling
2. Information Services
3. Networking
4. Work Experience
5. Graduate Placement
6. Integration within Curricula.

¹ As for the component of student welfare, it is assumed that those involved in such work will make the appropriate recommendations as we see “Career Guidance” and “Student Welfare” as distinct though a little related.

² Other contributing factors were a survey conducted by the Ceylon Chamber of Commerce in 1999 on what private sector employers would like to see as desirable attributes in university graduates at entry level and a study by Charles Fernando in 2002 on the basis of a survey undertaken among 50 Senior Managers dealing with recruitment and human resource development in organisations that recruit local graduates and a sample of 534 young graduates of the University of Sri Jayewardenepura.

As no start-up/seed money and other resources (both physical and human) had been provided openly and equally to the units, development of the units at the different universities had been somewhat haphazard dependent on whether those in charge were able to win the support and funds within the individual universities. For this reason, and considering the ground situation in the universities and how things happen, the focus during the last two years had been “institutionalization” – mainly to see that at least a somewhat functional unit with minimal resources was available at each university³. This was the reason for the preparation of the report dated December 2005 already referred to.

It is noted that an ambitious plan prepared in 1999 for developing Career Services was abandoned and a more realistic one was incorporated into the Circular of 2003 mainly due to problems and constraints faced by those in charge of the development of Career Guidance work. They were also disturbed by the fact that while some exceptions were present the typical Higher Education system continued to produce graduates classed as “unemployable”. There were other connected issues such as the fact that neither the State (e.g. Ministry of Planning, Human Resource Development Council, Department of Census and Statistics), nor the university system, nor the private sector were producing information on employment trends and needs.

Accepting however that one should not be daunted by existing problems, accepting also the invitation of the current Chair of the Standing Committee, we are now at a point of development where we are exploring ways of taking the work forward yet another step. As such we are happy to propose that the focal areas referred to earlier be amended/expanded as follows:

1. Counselling and Advice on Careers⁴
2. Employability Skills⁵
3. Information Services
4. Networking
5. Work Experience
6. Graduate Placement
7. Integration within Curricula.
8. Training, Research and Development⁶

It is strongly recommended that a concerted effort be made to further encourage and support the units to achieve:

1. “Institutionalization” such that a unit is functional in every university;
2. Meaningful involvement and inter-university collaboration in at least 1 to 6 above.
3. (Once reasonable progress is achieved in those areas) inter-university collaboration in areas 7 and 8.

³ It is argued that this is still a grave need. Further, as this is a new service it needs champions at decision making level either at each university or nationally.

⁴ Renamed to suit the current situation.

⁵ It is accepted that education is for both employment and life. While it is assumed that the development of life skills is a responsibility of education as a whole, and that the development of appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes among the graduates is the responsibility of Higher Education, given the needs of the Sri Lankan context and the requirements of employers it is argued that at least in the current stage of development and until such are fully integrated within the curriculum, what are typically classed as “employability skills” is an area where Career Guidance Units need to play an important role.

⁶ With the units functioning & looking after the most pressing needs, & with funds and resources (both material & human) becoming available, it would be possible to promote involvement in the more difficult areas such as 7 & 8.