

Incorporation of social harmony concepts into the career guidance programme

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Incorporation of Social Harmony Concepts into the Career Guidance Programme of the University of Moratuwa

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Social Harmony - "embraces a broad concept of the society in peaceful co-existence and moving towards elimination of all types of discrimination. Many factors could create social disharmony in any country based on religion, ethnicity, gender, equity issues, etc.. In extreme cases, it may lead to violence if timely action are not taken to prevent them"

Institution Profile

The University of Moratuwa (UoM) is the premier institution in Sri Lanka for technological learning in higher education. It has three faculties of academic study, viz. Engineering, Architecture and the more recently established Information Technology. Thus the teaching programmes conducted have a specific identifiable area of professional focus. However the graduates seek/find employment in diverse sectors of industry depending on their overall career objectives and opportunities available.

The overall student numbers are still 'manageable' compared to most other established national universities and the operational area is more or less still within a single campus.

Attributes/Characteristics of Relevance to UoM

The following basic characteristics could be identified as being of specific relevance to planning career guidance activities at the University of Moratuwa.

- 1) The medium of instruction is English for all courses. Thus the vast majority of students who have received their secondary school education in Sinhala or Tamil are exposed to a heavy 'dosage' of English.
- 2) Computer literacy is a must for effective learning of the technological type courses conducted. While some students have acquired a high degree of computer literacy at the time of entry, many others lack sufficient knowledge in computing.
- 3) A significant proportion of students prepare for other professional qualifications such as CIMA during their studentship on their own initiative, but a majority of students who desire to acquire similar status may be unable to do so due to their own resource limitations.
- 4) Courses conducted being of a professional nature, students are exposed to a reasonable degree of industry interaction within the academic programme itself.

A further factor, specific to the Faculty of Engineering, worth recording here, is the high degree of frustration exhibited by some students who have not been able to enter 'fields in demand' at a particular time at the field selection stage after the common first year programme. They end up in a highly demoralized state of their own making just one year after fulfilling their ambition of entering the much sought after 'engineering faculty' ! This could seriously affect their future studies and subsequent career progress.

Career Guidance Outlook in Relation to Social Harmony

Early entry to the university after Advanced Level Examination is considered a must for any careers programme to be meaningful and effective. Considerable delay in entry could be identified as a national level problem that has in the past contributed to social disharmony and youth unrest of different forms. The fresh graduate finds his contemporaries in school who have not been successful in gaining entry to the university gainfully employed. However the present UGC administration has been successful in reducing the gap to acceptable levels and the UoM also has played a lead role in this exercise.

The CGU will support every endeavour of the university to maintain an uninterrupted academic schedule through effective 'Career Counseling'. It will educate the students of the long-term repercussions of such interruptions on their own career and the future of those who are to embark on higher studies. Frequent disruptions of the academic schedule has been a key 'feature' in the national universities affecting career focus of undergraduates, although at UoM the problem has been well managed and not manifested in recent times.

Students enter from different social strata of the society and invariably their exposure, outlook and abilities in relation to demands of the technologically oriented courses at UoM vary. English being the medium of delivery and communication, and IT skills being a definite advantage poses problems. Some students are handicapped in this respect and this too is a contributory factor to disharmony. The CGU will endeavour to narrow this gap and bear this in mind in designing and executing professional development programmes.

Mode of Operation

The 'modus operandi' of the CGU will primarily be, where relevant, through mobilizing students themselves in organizing activities for professional development. Priority will be given for activities that would involve a majority of students, rather than small groups identified on a selective basis.

Small group activities (such as mentor programmes) are best decentralized to academic department level so that an entire sub-sector will be involved and therefore there will be not even

'unintentional discrimination' in conducting programmes. Such activities will be conducted primarily through the academic administration of individual departments who would recognize them as an integral part of their own discipline-oriented programmes of undergraduate skill development (i.e. 'integration with curricula'); here again the CGU will work in close collaboration with the departmental societies (which are primarily student managed entities which brings out the initiative and leadership/group work skills of undergraduates), in ensuring the effectiveness and quality of such programmes. However this would more or less be a supportive and monitoring role, rather than one of interference and control.

Local Community Considerations

It is not intended to address the broader issues and strategies in relation to external community in this presentation. These are enumerated in a proposal recently submitted by the university under the 'IRQUE Project'. However a specific theme in relation to possible 'technological harmony' in working with neighbouring institutions in the technical sector is mentioned here.

The current tendency of technical persons who have undergone different levels of training to 'work in compartments' is highly detrimental to the industry. A culture of team approach where each other's true potential and capabilities, and the level of knowledge and skills are mutually recognized and respected must be created. Therefore there is a need for these institutions to work together towards a common goal. The current scenario of all such institutions being under one key ministry (i.e. the 'Ministry of Tertiary Education and Training') is highly conducive to identifying potential areas of interaction and formulating appropriate mechanisms. However, this is a very delicate and sensitive issue that must be approached with sincerity so that it does not lead to further complications.

Conclusions

Individual universities need to carefully judge and assess their own academic environments in designing and executing career guidance programmes that would reach out and be of benefit to a broad sector of the undergraduate population.

Acknowledgement

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