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Implementation of Career Guidance Programmes in the University Sector

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Introduction

Over the last decade or so, the locus of challenging jobs has shifted markedly from state controlled departments and corporations to private sector entrepreneurial firms. With this change, the relevance of academic programmes conducted in different faculties of the local universities to industry needs in producing **employable graduates** has been discussed and debated at different fora and this topic continues to be a key national issue.

In many instances, academic departments or faculties have their own style and mechanisms of interaction with industry developed intentionally as an essential part of the academic programmes, or evolved naturally over a period of time of existence. Faculties of Medicine are perhaps a relevant example of such positive and formal interaction. However, more definite programmes and actions across the national universities need to be in place if any real change is to take place and tangible results achieved in a broader sense.

Background

The topic of career guidance was clearly mentioned in the education reforms related documents of 1971 and 1981, and subsequently taken up again in the reforms process initiated in the mid-90s. The then Ministry of Youth Affairs was instrumental in moving the UGC towards establishing career guidance units in four universities in the form of a pilot project.

University Reforms

The Current phase of activity of establishing formal mechanisms of career guidance in university sector emanates from the Presidential Task Force report of 1999 on University Reforms. The 'Establishment of Career Guidance Units' is clearly stated in the university reforms action plan of July 1999 conveyed to the Vice-Chancellors of the national universities via a notification by the

Chairman UGC. The communiqué also identifies other directly or indirectly related activities such as 'Links with the World of Work' and the importance of forming 'University, State and Private Sector Linkages"

Attributes/Characteristics of the Sector

Students enter the university system from different social strata of the society and invariably their exposure, outlook and abilities in relation to demands of the courses vary. Where English is the medium of delivery and communication, and where IT skills play a definite role in teaching and learning environment the problems are further aggravated. The majority of the students are handicapped in this respect and the career guidance programmes endeavour to narrow this gap.

Soft Skills

To be successful in the 21st Century, the graduate should not only have a sound fundamental knowledge but be able to adapt to the rapid changes in a profession they have embarked upon, and have a skill set associated with communication, team work and leadership. The average Sri Lankan graduate lacks confidence when stepping into the world of work due to poor **Soft Skills** (subject specific and generic) and incorrect **Attitudes** (values) compared to the foreign counterpart. It is generally accepted that the **Knowledge** component is at the required level, but here too it is often confined to subject specific knowledge rather than a broader knowledge based on wisdom.

Outlook in Programme Implementation

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 graduates find their 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.

Frequent disruptions of the academic schedule have been a key 'feature' in the national universities affecting career focus of undergraduates. The CGUs 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.

Policy/Operational Strategy

Career guidance and career service activities in the university sector seeks to support the undergraduates in their efforts to undertake **career education, career exploration, career choice, career planning and career management.**

Institutionalization

Career guidance programmes in the national universities are implemented in accordance with the directives and provisions in the *UGC Circular No. 819 (of 6th February 2003)* as regards **status** (academic/administrative), **infrastructure and facilities, finances, staffing and operation.** In planning and executing activities, the CGUs will endeavor to fulfill the 'Objectives of Career Guidance' as spelt out within the broad framework of '*Recommendations for the Development and Institutionalization of Career Guidance Services in the Universities*' as given in Annex-1 of the Circular. This is intended to be the benchmark for the university sector and, perhaps, could also serve as a benchmark for other national tertiary and vocational education sectors. The key areas are **Career Counseling, Information Services, Networking, Work Experience, Graduate Placement and Integration with Curricula.**

The monitoring and coordination of the career guidance activities is done by the UGC through the *Standing Committee on Career Guidance* which was established in May 2000. The Standing Committee plays an important role in facilitating interaction and collaboration between the CGUs, between the CGUs and industry, and also in supporting the career guidance initiatives at national level.

Mode of Operation

The 'modus operandi' of the CGUs will primarily be, where relevant, through mobilizing students themselves in organizing activities for professional development. Priority has to be given for activities that would involve a majority of students, rather than for activities targeted at small groups identified on a selective basis; the benefits from the latter category activities will only be marginal to an institution as far as realization of the overall objectives of career guidance are concerned.

Integration with Curricula

The action plan for effective implementation of career guidance is to make programmes sustainable by being 'built-into' the system and forming part of the system driven permanent mechanisms of training students, rather than conducting as adhoc events. This way career

guidance programmes will not be regarded as activities merely thrust upon the students, nor the academic community.

Small group activities (such as mentor programmes) are best decentralized to academic department level so that an entire sub-sector could be involved, and there will be uniformity in conducting programmes. Such activities may be conducted primarily through direct involvement of the academic administration of individual departments with the CGU role being that of a facilitator. The departments would thus learn to recognize them as an integral part of their own discipline-oriented programmes of undergraduate training. Here again the CGUs could work in close collaboration with the departmental societies (which are primarily student managed entities which bring 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.

National Level Interactions

The Career Guidance Services in the universities will individually, and also collectively through their official level involvement in the UGC Standing Committee and other apex bodies such as the Career Resource Forum (an initiative of the OPA), will make contributions towards the broader national career guidance objectives and also strive to benefit from such interactions by becoming aware of best practices elsewhere.

Conclusions

The real challenge of producing employable graduates lies not with the faculties conducting professional courses of study as clearly evident from tracer studies. Thus, different universities constituting of faculties distinctly different in nature need to think differently and innovatively based on their own expertise and experience in developing career guidance programmes. The reality with national universities is that there is no real pressure or incentive to 'market the product. The success at implementation stage of any career guidance programme would, therefore, depend at the present time on the voluntary commitment of the university staff and industry personnel towards the objectives, together with effective monitoring mechanisms.

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.

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