

BOLGODA CHAT

The First Vice Chancellor

An interview with
Prof (Retired). U. S. Kuruppu

A Technical College was being transformed to a university. This is the story of an academic who led the institution in its early years.

In the beginning, the present-day University of Moratuwa premises were occupied by the Ceylon College of Technology (CCT), which coexisted with the Institute of Practical Technology (IPT). The IPT predated the CCT by several years. When the JTP course was relocated from Maradana, there was a need for teaching at a higher level. Thus, the goal of establishing CCT was to offer a diploma equivalent to a degree. The CCT development project was implemented with UNESCO support.

I joined the institution in those days before it attained university status. Even though they had started the CCT, it was difficult to commence the program as there were not enough applications from qualified professors. Several young academics including myself wanted to apply, and yet we could not meet the minimum age limit of 35. I went and met Mr. I. M. R. A. Iriyagolle, the Minister of Education. He agreed to change the age limit, and many of us applied. I applied from University of Peradeniya. Initially, they sent us a letter saying that the conditions were not exactly equivalent to a university. We opposed this, stating that we would not join unless the conditions were made equivalent, and therefore, they changed it. In the end, I joined the CCT in December 1967. This is the beginning of my career at UoM.

Beginnings of a career

I had an elder sister, who we all had to follow. I went to Sri Sumangala Girls School. Then we went to Ananda Balika Vidyalaya. I passed the entrance college for Ananda College. But then the war came, the Japanese attacked pearl harbour, and our family moved to Rathnapura. I attended Rathnapura Sivali Central College for a while, and then to Royal College after coming back to Colombo. I learnt Latin, German, English, and French at various times during my education. I got used to punctuality from my family which I still practice.

My Bachelor's degree came from the University of Ceylon in 1954. I was among its first batch of engineering students, together with Prof. KKYW Perera. After completing my degree, I was offered a scholarship from the Federation of British Industries for a two-year training. I trained in Rugby, England from 1955 to December 1957, and returned to Sri Lanka in 1958. I started reading for my PhD in 1960 from the University of Cambridge. It was in Controls Engineering, which was quite a new subject at that time. I obtained a PhD in 1964. People sometimes ask me if I have two PhDs. I tell them "What nonsense, one PhD is bad enough". Those days, it took a long time to get the theses typed and for all other things to be done. On my way back home, I had a long trip during which I went to Belgium, Switzerland, Germany, Italy, and Bombay. Those were the days of hitchhiking. Before joining the CCT, I was an assistant probationary lecturer at the University of Ceylon since 1958.

Flying is something I greatly enjoyed. I got the pilot's licence in 1968, straight after joining Katubedda. My mother was not very happy about this flying business, and she hoped marriage would put a stop to that. Yet, ironically, my wife loved it. When I was in Cambridge, I also tried to learn how to fly gliders. However, could never progress to a stage where I could go alone in a glider.

The inception of UoM

It is very interesting when you start a place from scratch. Program delivery was challenging in the early days at CCT. Many visiting academics and experts from abroad helped with the delivery of the program in those early years. We had a struggle in getting sufficient lecturers even on a visiting basis, especially for the last two years of study in the program. We had to make do through personal contacts in identifying people and recruiting them, and we also had to send people out to get them trained



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and qualified. Even though the engineering programme had started, the Sumanadasa building was still under construction. When I joined UoM, Dr. Patuwathawithana was the Head of the Mechanical Engineering Department. When I joined as a Professor, I became HoD over him, since I was a couple of years senior to him. Mr. L. H. Sumandasa worked closely with Mr. R Paskaralingam, the Senior Assistant Secretary of the Ministry of Educa-

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tion at that time, in setting up the Technical College under the UNESCO project. Government support was invaluable in getting things done faster.

The ability to read a drawing was considered very important at that time, and I am sure it is still important. We argued with British people over the importance of being able to draw. I was teaching subjects such as mechanics of machines and controls engineering. The first batch of engineering students made a demand that only PhD-qualified academics should teach. But, I explained to them that these are only labels.

We became a university after the JVP uprising in 1971. Mr. Badi-ud-din Mahmud, the Minister of Education, appointed a committee for recommendations, and one of the suggestions made was to develop a single university with six campuses. Thus, the University of Sri Lanka was established in 1972. Dr. L. H. Sumanadasa was the first president of the Katubedda campus. Two years on, the previous Vice Chancellor resigned,

Tenure as the first Vice Chancellor

I was the president of the university campus from 1974 to 1978. When we became an independent university in 1979, I became the first vice chancellor. At the first convocation as a university, we gave a doctorate to Sir Arthur C. Clarke. I handed over the garland to Dr. Clarke. The next year, an honorary doctorate was awarded to Mr. L H Sumanadasa.

My tenure as the first Vice Chancellor of University of Moratuwa lasted until 1981. Unfortunately, there was a ragging incident at that time, and a committee was appointed to identify the culprits and deliver appropriate penalties. This resulted in a hunger strike by a group of students when we tried to issue punishments. There was political pressure to stop all punishments – the minister ordered us to stop all punishments, allowing the raggars to escape with no repercussions. The government made us backtrack even though they wanted the zero-ragging policy in the first place. I was against this decision. Fortunately, I got a position with UNESCO in Jakarta, and I promptly resigned from UoM. I never thought I would have to leave in two years.

and Mr. Sumanadasa became the VC of the University of Sri Lanka. When government changed in 1977, they promised to separate the single university into six independent universities. It took them a long time to pass the act, and it got delayed until 1979.

Life After UoM

After leaving the vice-chancellorship of UoM, my career was much less stressful. I was program specialist P5 (highest level of that category) for UNESCO. I was in charge of technology. There were other program specialists in charge of science, marine etc. Even though my engineering background was useful in the work I did for UNESCO, I have not practiced engineering for 40 years. There was a lot of travelling. China, Japan, Thailand, Malaysia – all around Asia, and I met a lot of different people. I also spent eight years in Ontario, Canada. Yet, I wanted to come back home, and I returned to Sri Lanka in 2001 and ever since have resided here.

It is very interesting when you start a place from scratch. When I was president of the university, most of the staff were my students. We were able to help in some little ways to get it started. I did think that we may become the most sought-after university for technology some day, since we have the locational advantage over the University of Peradeniya. Even though they started much earlier, we are close to industries and central locations. It is very satisfying to see the growth of the University of Moratuwa over the years.

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