

BOLGODA CHAT

The founding Dean of Engineering and Architecture

An interview with
Prof. K.K.Y.W. Perera

Now I'm 90 years old. 50 years ago I was appointed as the founding Dean of the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture.

I obtained my B.Sc. degree from the University of Ceylon, and Prof. Kuruppu was my batch-mate. There was only one university those days. My career at the University of Moratuwa started when the newly established Ceylon College of Technology (CCT) was started with virtually the university status, and they wanted to hire academic staff members. I was at the University of British Columbia, Canada at that time. Prof. Kuruppu sent me a letter telling that he joined CCT, and asking to join as well. I applied from Canada. Since CCT was a government institution, the Sri Lankan High Commissioner came in person from Ottawa to UBC to interview me. I completed my PhD in Electrical Engineering in 1969, and was selected for the job.

Later, the institution became a campus of the University of Sri Lanka. In 1972, I was the first Dean of Engineering and Architecture. Architecture at that time was a mature department operating under the University of Colombo, and they were shifted to Katubedda, and joined with the engineering programme. Later, after my time, the faculties were separated due to growth in different directions.

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*President of Katubedda Campus
1974.03.01 - 1974.11.14,
and, acting Vice-chancellor
1980.04.15 - 1980.07.17*

Dr. LH Sumanadasa, who used to be the chief of the CCT and was the president of the campus, became the Vice Chancellor of the University of Sri Lanka. I replaced him as the president of the campus in 1974. Later, the University of Moratuwa was established as a university on its own. The moment Prof. Kuruppu returned to Sri Lanka, I offered to resign and asked him to take over. He did not want to take over. However, I tendered my resignation to Dr. Sumanadasa, since Prof. Kuruppu was senior to me in academia. Around this time, there was no doctor on campus. Dr. Sumanadasa wanted to have a medical doctor on premises. The medical centre was therefore started based on my personal friendship with the University of Colombo medical, who started to attend to our campus two days a week. I also served as the Chancellor during two terms, including the current term.

After that, I worked as the Chairman of the Ceylon Electricity Board for around 10 years, and I was instrumental in establishing LECO. During that time as well, I still used to come and do my lectures in Electronics subjects. Later I was the acting Vice Chancellor in 1980 until Prof. Chandra Patuwathavithane was appointed as VC. The time as the Vice Chancellor was very busy, since I had to handle the academic staff, non-academic staff, and the printing press (which was used to exam papers and other materials). Even though it was a prestige to have a press, it involved a significant amount of work. We as professors and lecturers used to supervise the printing. After Prof. Patuwathavithane's unfortunate demise, Prof. GTF De Silva bravely took over.

At some stage, Prof Ajith de Alwis and I worked to establish the first "Research Cell" at the University.

After my retirement from the University at the age of 65 years, I again had a chance to serve the University of Moratuwa. This is when the Asian Development Bank (ADB) was preparing the Science and Technology Development Project (STPDP) for Sri Lanka. They had already appointed Educational Consultants of India as Consultants (EDCIL) for the project preparation. EDCIL with the concurrence of ADB, appointed me as the local team leader. The project was to cover the University of Moratuwa and 12 other institutions, including Universities which were teaching Sciences and other scientific R&D organizations.



Prof. K. K. Y. W. Perera

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Therefore, I had a hand in project preparation, and we included lab equipment, training and postgraduate training as well as helping with the development of postgraduate (Masters) courses. Our team acted in a manner fair by all institutions in the recommendation for distribution of resources. Moratuwa had very little resources, and therefore got more. Later, after the Government approved the Project, ADB agreed to give funds and the Ministry of Science and Technology took over the Project implementation. I was fortunate

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to be selected as the Director of the project. We procured equipment and engaged even foreign consultants where necessary. Most importantly, we solidly established post-graduate courses leading to Master's degrees in all Engineering Departments. Architecture already had Master's courses and the project helped them to establish a "fashion design course." For the Masters courses, the project paid the individual course fees and also gave a monthly living allowance for each graduate following a course. Thus, many graduates were attracted to follow the courses. Initially, I was concerned that the M.Sc. courses may dry up after ADB funding was exhausted. However, they actually flourished because the private sector as well as state institutions such as the CEB realized the value of sending their employees and supported many of them.

Initially, we were worried about the employability of our graduates, since we were not well known. In order to maintain our reputation and record, we had to exert significant control, without allowing strikes and similar actions. The public respected us because of our discipline. During the very first half-day strike by the students, we were very worried. One senior lecturer asked the students why they were taking this action, and he received the answer that this is due to a price hike for chillies. In reality, this was caused by the Chilean crisis, a protest against USA attacking Chile. However, those students had mistakenly assumed it had something to do with chillies due to the similar sounding names. Those days, University of Peradeniya was deemed to have the better engineering faculty. However, our records were good, our discipline was good, and we came up.

I have been working with the University of Moratuwa since the inception to this date. The evolution of the university to date has been fantastic. I did not expect it to become this big in those days. We now have 6 Faculties, including a medical faculty.

CEB was rich at that time. Govt used to borrow money from CEB. I was the chairman. Working was easier than nowadays. Almost no corruption or political interference.

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