

APIIT Promoting Quality And Diversity In Higher Education Through Global Partnership

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With the objective of promoting quality in higher education through global partnerships, the Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT) Sri Lanka has been established in partnership with Staffordshire University in the UK and APIIT

in Malaysia. APIIT Sri Lanka has been offering globally recognised Internal British degrees in computing, business management and law for over a decade. The Institute aims to further diversify its degree portfolio to meet the varying needs of students and provide them with an enhanced learning experience, says Dr Athula Pitigala-Arachchi, Chief Executive Officer of APIIT Sri Lanka.

By Madhushala Senaratne

Photography by Mahesh Prasantha

As a higher education provider, what is the goal and mission of APIIT?

Higher Education in Sri Lanka is in crisis. There are many facets to this crisis and let me draw your attention to just three of them. Firstly, the state sector cannot meet the demand for higher education.

The GCE Advanced Level programme is designed to prepare students for university education and annually about 200,000 students sit for the Advanced Level examination; more than 50 percent of these students qualify for university entrance. However, only about 20,000 students can be enrolled in all the state universities in Sri Lanka, because the facilities are limited. In other words, more than 100,000 qualified students are shut out from the university system each year. This is a serious national issue; the youth of this country do not have adequate opportunities to pursue higher studies, develop their knowledge and skills and play a significant role in national development.

The second aspect of the crisis in higher education relates to quality and standards. Over the years, there has been an attempt to increase the number of students in the university system. However, the increase in student numbers has not been supported by a concomitant increase in investments into higher education. As a result, the development of the universities has lagged behind; it is the quality parameters, such as attracting and retaining high quality staff, staff training, revision of curricula, acquisition of library material and expansion of laboratories,

that have been hardest hit.

The outcome of this neglect is visible to all of us. Many graduates cannot find employment. The university education is at a tangent to the developmental needs of the country. There is a clear mismatch between the training provided and the requirements of the industry and commerce. This has led to a somewhat farcical though sad situation where on one side we have unemployed graduates and on the other, we have a lot of vacancies that the corporate sector is struggling to fill.

Thirdly, there is a lack of diversity in the higher education sector both in terms of institutions and programmes. The universities are monolithic and the programmes are obsolete. In the developed world, most universities offer many innovative programmes whereas the total number of degrees offered in our country in the entire university system is about 80. Most of our universities offer conventional courses such as degrees in botany, physics, chemistry, engineering, medicine, history, sociology and political science to name a few. We have been doing this for many years. Without doubt, these course areas are important, but the needs of the modern society and industry have expanded to such an extent that we have to produce a diversity of graduates to meet the changing requirements.

Firstly, We Have To Make Sure Our Graduates Are Employable Immediately Upon Completion Of Their Studies. Secondly, We Make Sure That They Are Effective In Employment, Can Contribute To The Organisations That They Work For And Through That Organisations, Contribute To National Development.

Therefore, our goal is to help fill this void in higher education by contributing towards improving the quality and standards of higher education. We wish to expand opportunities for higher education in the country by offering innovative programmes that are relevant to the needs of the industry and commerce. We will make a significant contribution to manpower development and socio-economic advancement of the country. That is our overall mission and that is the direction in which we are heading.

You talked about offering innovative programmes; what are the main programmes offered at APIIT?

We started our academic operation in the year 2000 with a Diploma in Computing and a small group of students. Over the last ten years, we have expanded rapidly. At present, we offer eight undergraduate and two Masters Degrees in computing, business management and law. We also offer 'hybrid' degree programmes combining business and IT. Today, business takes place in an IT environment and all graduates must have a good grounding in IT.

What steps have you taken to ensure that the institute produces graduates who are employable?

We are in close touch with industry and commerce and we get a lot of feedback on the changing environment. We work closely with various industry organisations and take part in industry seminars and conferences. We also invite the industry leaders for discussions and to make presentations to our staff and students. Education services need to be informed by the changing dynamics of the job market.

When we select degree programmes, we look at the demand for personnel in the country and ensure that the programmes are relevant to the needs of the industry and commerce. Further, there is continuous revision and improvement of the programmes to keep pace with the changes in the market. Therefore, when the students graduate through our programmes, they are immediately employable as well as effective in employment. These are two aspects we are most concerned about and worth repeating. That is, we strive to ensure that our students are employable immediately on graduation and that they are effective in employment. As a result, the graduates may go on to have rewarding careers and fulfilling lives while contributing to national development.

How do you guarantee the quality and high standards of your programmes?

Staffordshire University is a public university in the UK funded by the government. The University assures the quality and standard of their degree programmes we conduct in Colombo. For this purpose, the University has set in place a comprehensive quality assurance framework to ensure that the learning experience and learning outcomes of students studying at APIIT are similar to those of students studying on campus in the UK.

Further, as we offer a British degree programme, we come under the purview of the Quality Assurance Agency of the United Kingdom. The UK Quality Assurance Agency is an independent body that looks into the quality and standards of university education to safeguard public interest. They periodically monitor the conduct of the British degree programmes at APIIT either directly or through the University.

In addition, we ourselves have internal quality assurance processes. Our management system has been accredited as conforming to ISO 9001:2008 international standards.

In short, we maintain the same standard of higher education as in the UK; our graduates receive the same degree certificates as those studying in Staffordshire University in the UK.

You referred to a Quality Assurance Framework established by Staffordshire University. Can you elaborate on this?

There are many aspects and dimensions to the quality assurance framework. It starts with the comprehensive process that we have to go through to receive the approval to conduct degree programmes in Colombo. Through this process known as validation, the University satisfies itself that we have the education management experience and expertise, adequate resources to support the programmes and qualified and competent lecturers to teach in the programmes. We also agree on control mechanisms to ensure adherence to the University rules and regulations.

We Should Be Able To Produce Graduates Who Are Globally Competitive. With Globalisation, The Boundaries Have Disappeared, And Jobs As Well As Employees Seamlessly Move Around. Our Students Should Be Able To Find Employment Either In Sri Lanka Or Abroad.

During the conduct of the programmes, there is continuous monitoring. Senior academics of Staffordshire University known as International Programme Advisors frequently visit us to audit our resources to ensure that the resources are up to date and adequate. They also sit in lectures and laboratory sessions to assess the quality of teaching. They interview the lecturers and students to learn about their

experience. These monitoring visits result in comprehensive reports about the status of the academic operation. Further, appointment of academic staff requires prior approval by the University. The University also approves and moderates all student assessments. All these activities constitute a comprehensive quality assurance framework to establish that the learning experience of the students in Sri Lanka is similar to the learning experience of students in the UK and that the quality of graduates we produce here is similar to the quality of graduates coming out of the same programmes in the UK.

Can you elaborate on APIIT's collaborations with foreign universities?

Our main collaboration is with Staffordshire University; all the degree programmes we conduct in computing/IT, business and law are Staffordshire University awards.

We are also affiliated to a number of other universities in the UK and Australia. We do not run their study programmes, but they recognise the programmes we conduct at APIIT and as a result our students can obtain credit transfers to complete their studies in those universities. For example, when a student has completed one year of studies here, they can enter the second year of a relevant study programme in an affiliated university.

This does not mean our students can transfer only to the affiliated universities. The British degree programmes we conduct at APIIT are internationally recognised and students may seek transfer to any university in the world.

What are the facilities offered to students?

We have a large full-time faculty of highly qualified and competent lecturers. They are supplemented by visiting staff from the state universities and industry. We also have a highly professional management team. In addition, our resources are amongst the best in the country for higher education and comparable to those in developed countries.

Higher education cannot be limited to classroom work, or laboratory work. Students

also need recreation and other extracurricular activities to develop to their full potential. We have a student body known as the Student Activity Club. They organise a number of recreational and sports activities; these include indoor and outdoor sports, socials, concerts and community projects. We have also established a Toastmasters Club, which is very active and helps students develop their leadership and communication skills.

What are the future plans of APIIT?

Our vision is to become a leading higher education institution in the Asia Pacific region with a global reputation for academic excellence. This is extremely important for us for several reasons. Firstly, our students should be able to transfer to any foreign university for further studies either to complete the first degree or for postgraduate studies. Also, we should be able to produce graduates who are globally competitive. With globalisation, the boundaries have disappeared, and jobs as well as employees seamlessly move around. Our students should be able to find employment either in Sri Lanka or abroad.

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We wish to enhance our contribution to higher education. While increasing the number of degree programmes in the areas of computing, business and law, we also want to expand into other areas where there is a demand for qualified professionals.

How do you foresee the development of private higher education in the country?

Private higher education is a must for any country. The government alone cannot meet the demand for high quality education; it is imperative that private funds are brought into higher education. This is the only way to expand the higher education

sector to cater to a wider student base and meet the diverse needs of the country while maintaining quality and standards.

However, when the private sector expands, there is a need for quality assurance. We have to make sure that the students who enter private higher education institutions receive value for money. In order to ensure quality and standards, an independent organisation that looks into the education provision in the private sector is needed. Such a body can ensure that the private institutions have the required qualified staff, the necessary resources and the expertise to run the degree programmes, so that the standards can be maintained and the students receive high quality education.

We urge the government to set up an independent quality assurance and accreditation body to regulate higher education. However, I must hasten to add that regulation should not be confused with suppression. The quality assurance and accreditation mechanism I have in mind is one that will actively promote the growth of private higher education while safeguarding public interest.

