

Nurturing The Future Generation

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British College of Applied Sciences (BCAS) since its inception has been at the forefront of introducing innovative programmes and creating opportunities for students while focusing on the effectiveness and quality of their courses. M M Abdur Rahman, Chairman speaks about its journey and what makes BCAS stand out from the rest.

By Hansani Bandara | Photography BT Images

What was the thinking behind the establishment of BCAS Campus?

I graduated from the University of Peradeniya in 1996, and then proceeded to work in Sri Lanka and the United Kingdom, following which I was able to gain academic and industry exposure. Having progressed from such a background made me re-think what is happening in Sri Lanka, in terms of higher education and career opportunities. I was able to identify a gap between the market demand and the programmes that are offered at the universities.

The programme focused on one thing, whereas the need was something entirely different. For instance, I am a Manufacturing Engineering graduate; we studied rigorously throughout our four years at the university, but with all those academic activities, when we came to the industry, we realised that what we learnt and were exposed to, are different from what is expected of us by the industry.

The formal tertiary education system in this country is not market oriented unfortunately. It is not structured based on the market or industry needs or that of the country. During my time in the UK, I was able to examine how the university systems are structured. The research activities of an engineering university in UK are decided by the industry stakeholders. If it is automobile engineering, then automobile companies will decide what is to be done in that particular year by the students. This works both ways; the industry gets what they want from the university, and the students get a training that is in accordance with the industry requirements. When they graduate they are immediately employable. However, I knew that bringing about this change in the local university system is beyond my reach since it is a very bureaucratic system. That was one reason.

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Secondly, there are very minimal or limited opportunities here for students. Out of the students who get qualified for tertiary education, only a small fraction enters local universities; of course this has improved gradually. I wanted to create more higher education opportunities that are market relevant. That is when I ventured onto start the institute. When you establish an institute, eventually the need arises to form collaborations with foreign universities, especially forming partnerships with universities in the UK. Then the challenge is the cost, working out a way to make such foreign university programmes affordable. Affordability and accessibility of the programmes were the parameters we were considering. In that exploration we realised that we can set up pathway programmes, where higher national diplomas lead to university degrees, but at a very minimal cost. It is with this thinking that I founded the institution.

The purpose of naming the institute, 'British College of Applied Studies', is to one day develop it to a place where students can get market relevant and applied skills, which will ensure job opportunities immediately. At the same time, we wanted to provide students with the opportunity of earning foreign university degrees at an affordable cost. This is how I founded this institution. Originally it was founded in Kandy in 1999. Since then we have

worked towards continuous development, adding more portfolios and programmes, and expanding our network to bring BCAS to the status it is today. For the last 16 years we have been able to position ourselves as one of the leading higher education providers.

What is the spectrum of qualifications offered by the institute?

With the vision of offering market relevant programmes, we provide courses on a number of subjects that have been identified to present market opportunities. These include, business management, computing, engineering, bio medical sciences, building studies and law.

Where our basic objective of providing higher education opportunities for students who are not getting those government universities, it is pertinent to ensure flexible entry rules. There are flexible study paths and various progression options for the students. Under each spectrum or discipline we have introduced four levels of programmes-foundation, higher national diploma, top up level and masters. We started with foundation, following which students were transferred to complete their studies in the UK. Then we introduced the higher national diploma programmes (HNDs), which are equivalent to the first two years of a degree. With that they can join a university for the final year. The top up degree was then introduced few years ago and last year we initiated masters programmes as well.

In addition to the academic programmes, we have an equally strong vocational training division. With such programmes, we identify gaps in vocational training and address those accordingly. For example, local youth who drop out from schools seek employment in the Middle East as office assistants and helpers with the maximum salary of 1,000 Riyals (around 35,000 rupees), and there is no career development from that point. When we analysed the market we found out that if they are given training and skills development, they can go to the next level, and be employed as middle level technical people, especially in the construction industry. After gathering this intelligence from the market, back in 2004 we developed a training programme in construction as an experiment. After 11 years, today the programme ensures 100 percent employment. All the people trained by us are employed with substantial salaries. The starting salary of any student who completes our programme on vocational training is minimum 100,000 rupees. There are some students who earn up to 700,000 rupees per month; and if you look at their qualifications, an average O/L or A/L along with our training programme. I am proud to say that in Sri Lanka in the private sector, we are the only institute that provides that type of training.

Can you explain about student life at BCAS? What are the curricular activities that are available?

I always say this fact very frankly to our students; though you are studying at BCAS or any other private institution, remember you are losing a proper university life. I studied in a university environment, and the life there is different, but I can't provide that here. We don't have that campus environment or the atmosphere. Yet, we strive hard to compensate for that. We have a strong and vibrant student council. Our student council is more active than that of a university. We support them financially. All the programmes organised by the council are sponsored by us, where we encourage them to organise common social activities, sports and recreational activities.

Apart from that within the departments there are societies, through which semi-curricular and extracurricular activities are organised. If we take our law students, from the first year onwards mooting and debating activities are conducted in order to enrich specific skills needed for their profession. That is how the student life at BCAS is made very colourful and sociable. In addition to that we have cultural activities that aid in promoting harmony and teamwork.

About the academic staff of the institution?

That is a key strength of BCAS because it's a knowledge-based industry. In an education institution, your assets are not the computers, desks and chairs but the intellectual resources staff. We are quite strong in that. At least 80 percent of our academic staff are employed on full time basis. Recently, we recruited a senior professor-a former vice chancellor at a top Sri Lankan university and former chairman of the University Grants Commission (UGC)-to head the academic activities.

Majority of our programmes are full time programmes, and when a student gets enrolled in such a course he/she must have access to learning support outside the classroom. It is not just about the lecturer coming to the classroom, talking something and walking away. There should be a holistic approach to the learning process.

What are your thoughts on the current situation of the tertiary education system in Sri Lanka where the private sector is concerned, and your role in it?

Over the last 15 years, there has been a tremendous growth in the private education opportunities in Sri Lanka. Before 1997/98 there weren't many private institutes, there were

a few and the programmes were expensive. Due to the growth of institutions the cost decreases and there are more opportunities. However, such programmes are often not quality oriented and properly regulated by the government. I always complain about this and also don't see any satisfactory level of progress in that line. In other countries government policies are developed to encourage more private entities to enter tertiary education, but with strict quality control regulations. It is not happening in Sri Lanka. That should be done by the Tertiary Vocation Education Commission (TVEC).

As a result of that, there are many students who are wasting their money in private institutions. There are students who complete two years of engineering foundation in private institutions, but if you look at their transcript after two years of studying, there is not a single subject of engineering in their study list. This is how opportunities are exploited. This has turned into a purely commercial activity for many of the institutions.

As a responsible institution we have gone that extra mile of implementing a self regulatory programme. We have set our own self-imposed quality regime to ensure that what we impart to our students is up to standard. We have a quality monitoring team based in Colombo that supervises all the departments and centres. Further, our foreign partners are supervising us. When working with Edexcel UK academic audits are conducted twice a year. These are called External Verification (EV) procedures. There are audits for each university programme we do.

We have contributed much to this country. For the past ten years around 2,000 students have graduated from our vocational training course, all of them are employed with very good salaries. Around 90 percent of them are employed in the Middle East. That is foreign income coming into the country. We have been able to create employment and a good foreign income source for this country. If you look at other academic areas, we have been able to give opportunities for thousands of students who were qualified to do a degree but not admitted to state universities. I am proud to claim that we have substantially contributed towards addressing a national need.

We have been able to set a trend for others to follow. For instance we introduced a degree in quantity surveying for the first time in the private sector in 2005. The University of Moratuwa was taking around 50 students per year for the same degree whereas there are over 1,000 vacancies each year in that profession.

We intervened to fill this gap. When we started this no one believed that it could be done. Today the top selling programme of BCAS is the Degree in Quantity Surveying. We have filled the gap of a national requirement with innovative programmes introduced through new thinking thereby creating more opportunities.

There are many graduates who find work overseas, which actually relates to the brain drain occurring in the country. What are your thoughts on this?

It has to be looked at rationally rather than from a theoretical point of view. If you look at the productivity, it helps both ways. For example, where you have a raw material and no technology to convert it into a product, you could export it to another country and earn revenue.

You Can't Call It A Brain Drain, But Rather Exporting Of Knowledge. That Is The Way We Should Look At It.

One of the national issues of the country today is unemployed graduates, why? What's the amount of money we spend on educating them from grade one to university? After spending all that money they should have become an asset to the country, instead they become a liability. Even after completing a first class business degree, they depend on the government for a job. The government too addresses this politically, where they would give jobs without no desks or work to do. It is an absolute waste of resources. Of course, fundamentally the country must utilise the intellectual capacity of its citizens. When such resources cannot be taken into use immediately, they can be exported to earn a return for the country. It is a gradual process. When we started the quantity surveying degree, almost 100 percent of our graduates went abroad for jobs after completion. Now, about 30 percent stay here, because there are jobs now. That way, you can't call it a brain drain, but rather exporting of knowledge. That is the way we should look at it.

It has to happen according to fair market conditions. The condition is that the local market has to develop a mechanism to use the knowledge of the people or let them contribute to the country in a different way by offering it somewhere else. That is how I look at it.

How do you think this should be addressed?

It has to be addressed through overall national planning. Our national development plans have to be formulated keeping in mind the capacity of local knowledge that can be used and how to create opportunities for that.

For the last four to five years majority of the development projects were funded through Chinese funding; but with the condition that even the labourer must be brought in from China. It is not contributing to the economy of the country. Basically when you execute a development project with foreign borrowings, the idea is to circulate the money here, create livelihoods and job opportunities to the people. Whereas now what do we do? Borrow the money, pay interest and send all the returns to that particular country. Therefore economic planning must take place from a holistic view and approach, focusing on how we can make the best use of our intellectual resources, that is professors, graduates and educated people. It has to happen that way. You can't just make a proclamation saying that educated people should not leave the country and declare those that do as unpatriotic. It's a global market; you can't just confine yourself and look at it merely from a local point of view.

Let our resources be used in the best possible way anywhere and let's benefit from that.

How to do you help your students to realise their career dreams?

This is a key strength that we have developed over time and is again an important factor, which has earned us a good reputation. We have in-house a fully-fledged placement division and counselling division. Their duty is to guide, support and help the students in order to find better education or employment opportunities. In some institutions, they will complete the course after which the students are not guided on what to do next. We are giving a fully-fledged option.

If somebody is joining the foundation level, we inform him of the options available and that he can either choose to complete the entire programme here or about the career options that are available while studying. When we started to quantity-surveying course, we realised that with HND qualification these students can get very attractive jobs in the Middle East. However, the problem is, when you go on and settle in a job, you often tend to lose the opportunity of continuing studies. That is why we have established a centre in Qatar to help our students. This way we help students to get through the first part of their course, get jobs and continue studies while working. We are committed to assist students to reach their final target in a more flexible and convenient manner.

What are the future plans of BCAS?

We are steadily working towards attaining the private university status. We are developing our campuses in some selected centres such as Kandy and Mount Lavinia. Our centre in Mt

Lavinia is being developed into a postgraduate study centre for BCAS Campus in future.

Our vision is to attract foreign students to study at this centre. Currently, for our MSc programmes we attract students from Qatar. While students are recruited in Qatar, they are given block teaching (five blocks with each block containing three days of study sessions) here. We fly them down bearing the cost of the air ticket and provide accommodation as well. During such times, the universities fly there lecturers from the UK. Following these sessions, further tutoring is delivered in Qatar. We want to create international programmes and further strengthen those by bringing in students from India and China as well.

We are also working on developing our Middle East network. That's a potential market we are looking at. Starting from this year we hope to develop centres in Saudi, Jeddah and Kuwait.

In terms of introducing new disciplines, we are now in discussion with a top medical university in Russia to introduce a medical pathway programme. This means that students may be able to complete up to two years in Sri Lanka and transfer to Russia to complete the rest. Similarly we are looking into introducing a nursing programme as well. Further, more portfolios will be added to engineering and bio medical sciences.

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Final thoughts?

I believe that this industry has to be managed with a different perception. The primary objective must be to deliver a quality and responsible service to the students. Why I say this is because if an education institution makes any mistake that is going to have a lasting negative impact on the lives of students. Therefore, the industry has to deliver responsible and service oriented programmes to students.

There is aggressive development in the private sector tertiary education providers and therefore a very well coordinated public private partnership is essential. This is not happening, there is a serious gap. The UGC must have a separate division or a separate scheme of recognizing private institutions, which will ensure quality education to the

students. For example there could be UGC approved private institutions and others. This way the students will have a better choice and will know how to make an informed decision. This needs to happen if the industry is to be sustained and contribute to the economy in the country. If not, in another few years' time we will have foreign qualified unemployed graduates in this country because they were not educated and guided properly. It will become another social and national issue.

