Skill Is The Power. Skill Is The Honour.

The National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) imparts industrial and mechanical knowledge in a world that had become mechanised. In 1971, the National Apprenticeship Board (NAB) was established in an effort to improve the industrial and mechanical

knowledge of the Sri Lankan youth. The NAB was eventually converted into the National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA) in 1991. Dr Saranga Alahapperuma, Chairman/ CEO, NAITA discusses the importance of vocational training, the value of an internationally recognised certificate and the strength that comes from refining ones' skills.

By Gayathri Kothalawala
Photography Mahesh Bandara and Vishwathan Tharmakulasingham

Can you tell us why NAITA plays a significant role in the country?
For the last two to three decades, we have observed the world gradually transforming. Automation has superseded a previously predominant manual work force. Education methodologies in developed countries have adapted to acclimatise to this conversion: in a world operated by machines, precedence was given to careers that centred around manufacturing, operating and maintaining the machinery that had made the lives of people easier.

However, in Sri Lanka, the education system was not altered to instruct students on industrial and mechanical knowledge at school level. As machines have begun to supplant humans, career opportunities across various sectors are dwindling. That is why graduate students in the art stream are left unemployed after graduation. If this situation was to improve, the society would experience a meaningful impact. Until such time, intelligent and talented students will continue to encounter obstacles in securing employment.

That is why institutes such as NAITA, that equip students with basic necessities such as industrial knowledge and training that caters to the national and international requirements, are vital for the country.

Why should a young adult consider vocational training as a viable plan for their future?
There is a misconception in society that NAITA is for students who are unable to

perform well during their secondary education. However, vocational training is designed to cater to the needs of all; that is, the skilled professionals, workers and labourers.

According to the Multiple Intelligence Theory developed in 1983 by Dr Howard Gardner, an educationalist at Harvard University, there are different intelligences rather than one uniform intelligence. Linguistic intelligence and logical-mathematical intelligence are conducive to navigate through formal education. But there are people who possess bodily-kinesthetic intelligence or musical intelligence or another form of intelligence. If a group of animals were commanded to climb a tree, simians and birds can easily accomplish that. But other animals like elephants, giraffes or even fish would not. An education system similar to this, where the educationalist believes in the traditional notion of intelligence based on exam results, does not encourage students who have widely different intelligences to perform equally. A student may struggle with mathematics or the sciences, but he may effortlessly grasp mechanical knowledge.

> **Vocational Training Is Not A Field For Those Who Cannot Pursue A Tertiary Level Education, This Is A Specialised Field That Caters To A Specific Intelligence.**

This is not a field for those who cannot pursue a tertiary level education, this is a specialised field that caters to a specific intelligence. We are entering into the fourth industrial revolution, the age of artificial intelligence. At the moment, we are experiencing the third industrial revolution; digitalisation. It is already evident that simply possessing the theoretical knowledge does not suffice.

In order to successfully steer through the modifications that artificial intelligence will demand of the world, technical knowledge is imperative. Students hesitate to enter into vocational training because of their misconceptions. But, the world is changing and there will be numerous opportunities to build a successful career in this sector.

What are the industrial sectors in which you offer apprenticeship?

At NAITA, there are two sectors: National institutes and District centres. There are four centre-based national institutes at present; the Automobile Engineering Training Institute at Orugodawaththa, the Institute of Engineering Technology at Katunayake, the Sri Lanka-German Training Institutue in Kilinochchi as well as the Technical College at Katubedda. At district level, we have 85 basic training centres.

We offer over 150 courses across 25 sectors. Dr Sarath Amunugama, Minister of Skills Development and Vocational Training has instructed us to give priority to five sectors based on the national and international requirements; the construction sector, hospitality sector, automobile sector, IT sector and the healthcare sector which encompasses nursing and caregiving.

These sectors are extremely popular both in Sri Lanka and internationally, and offer attractive remunerations. Therefore, while we do offer courses in other fields such as beauty culture and pre-school teaching, priority is given to those particular sectors, considering the global stipulations.

Students Hesitate To Enter Into Vocational Training Becuase Of Their Misconceptions. But, The World Is Changing…

The ministry has also tasked the vocational training centres under its authority with four objectives: training institutes are to double the intake for relevant fields which are popular among employers and employees alike; improve the quality of the courses, so that certificate holders would assuredly find employment at an international level; rationalisation, where the institutes would improve relevant courses and discard redundant ones; and digitalisation, where the institutes will shift towards a paperless culture.

At present, we are focusing on these objectives. With the guidance of the ministry, and the support of the employees and officials at NAITA, we have come on a successful one-month journey following my appointment.

How does the apprenticeship programme work?

With the exception of the four national institutes, we do not function as an institute; we are an industrial-based, apprenticeship-mode training provider modelled after

German procedures. Currently, we are the only Sri Lankan authority to offer such apprenticeship training. Our training centres are the industries; we collaborate with them.

For instance, when recruiting apprentices for the hospitality sector, we provide them with a two-month basic training at the training institute. Once the training is complete, they are transferred to a relevant hotel where they gain practical experience. In the meantime, we do offer practical modules and assessment modules, while continuously monitoring them. Once their course has concluded, we assess them and provided they prove their competency, we issue a certificate.

All courses offer the NAITA certification, and as we collaborate with the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) system, the majority of the courses also allow the student to receive an NVQ certificate.

While some courses for sectors that include masonry, carpentry and stewardship do not require a strong formal education; for courses designed for assistant quality managers, construction supervisors and other such areas, we do require eligibility in some criteria including educational backgrounds.

> **The Certificate Is Also Recognised By International Employers As Well. In Addition To The NAITA Accreditation, The Students Receives An NVQ Certificate, Which Is Recognised Internationally.**

However, this does depend on the course; if a student does not have adequate educational qualifications, they can instead follow the foundation course offered by NAITA and join the training path.

At the national institutes, employability is one hundred per cent assured. Thus, we call for applications and conduct a screening test. This is for students who have higher qualifications.

What does a student stand to gain by participating in a NAITA course?

The NAITA certificate is immensely valuable for an individual who wishes to find employment in the government sector or private sector. The certificate is also recognised by international employers as well. In addition to the NAITA accreditation, the student receives an NVQ certification, which is recognised internationally.

If the student performs well during their training period, they can easily find employment, since career opportunities are abundant both nationally and internationally. They work in the industry as students, which allow them to gather industrial knowledge and experience, as well as maturity. At the end of the day, they are skilled professionals with secure stable careers.

What are the steps that a NAITA student needs to complete to receive a National Vocational Qualification?

There are two avenues through which the student can receive an NVQ certificate; the NVQ craft course or the NVQ course. The student can select which avenue best suit them and pursue the modules offered by the course. Once they complete the theoretical and practical modules, we conduct examinations prior to issuing the certificate to students who perform well.

In this system, there are no grades; you are either competent or not. If a student is competent, they receive the certificate. We have revised the system so that the craft courses also offer the NVQ certification.

What is the Recognition of Prior Learning?

Sri Lanka has an increasing labour force that is between eight to nine million. Of this number, approximately four million people are working in the industry and contributing to the economy without a relevant qualification.

At NAITA, we offer a qualification for them. For instance, there are people who have worked in the masonry industry for years. If they can prove that they have more than four years of experience, they can apply for the Recognition of Prior Learning or RPL. We would conduct a pre-assessment to decide whether they are suitable for an NVQ three- assistant craftsman level,- or an NVQ four- craftsman level. According

to the pre-assessment conclusions, we would offer revised knowledge based on the relevant field, and conduct an exam. If they complete the exam successfully, an NVQ certification is then issued to them.

There are more than four million people across every industry who do not have proper qualifications. We are therefore collaborating with an entity from the private sector to issue RPLs for the people who have competency and good work ethics.

We are working with the three armed forces and the police as well. After 22-years, the armed forces have compulsory retirement. If a youth entered at 18-years of age, the individual would be 40-years of age at retirement, at the prime of life. With the RPL, they can reintegrate into the society with a career in a good industry, whether nationally or internationally.

> **We Are Collaborating With An Entity From The Private Sector To Issue RPLs For The People Who Have Competency And Good Work Ethics.**

People who retire from the armed forces or the police force have good discipline, energy and enthusiasm. So I think rather than sending unskilled people overseas, if we can send these skilled people overseas for employment, it would be advantageous for both themselves and the economy of the country.

What is the importance of having an NVQ certificate?
The NVQ is an internationally recognised certificate. NVQ three is equivalent to Ordinary Level in the relevant field. The government recognises an NVQ three holder as an O/L passed individual. The NVQ four is equivalent to the Advanced Level, again in the relevant field.

For instance, if a graphic designer has an NVQ three or four in graphic design, according to the government recruitment procedure, they are eligible for employment at a government institution.

While NAITA only offers NVQ three and four, other institutes and vocational training universities do offer NVQ five, six and seven. The NVQ seven is on par with a university degree in the relevant field.

Can the student find support beyond their course of study in finding employment? For instance, does NAITA offer guidance should a student desire to become an entrepreneur?
We do have a separate entrepreneurship development programme. Once a student completes the programme, with the support of the Central Bank and the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training, we provide a seven per cent interest loan together with the NVQ certificate.

In any country, the small and medium entrepreneurs contribute about 85 per cent to the economy. It is extremely important to promote entrepreneurs and we are dedicated to the task.

We also maintain close relationships with every industry. Thus, we are capable of supporting our students to find employment at a relevant field. We plan to implement a job bank system by the end of the year. But at the moment, once the students are placed for apprenticeship, they can successfully find employment without overt support from NAITA.

Do you offer other services to the students that are similar to the apprenticeship programme?
Since 2015, following government policy, these courses are completely free of charges. In the meantime, we also offer career guidance, personality development, and entrepreneurship assistance.

There is a scarcity of skilled professionals across different sectors. What are your thoughts on this?
Our youth are always looking for white-collar jobs or easy money, so they are not ready to go for hard skill jobs. Even construction, hospitality, automobile, and healthcare industries struggle to find skilled employees. The labour shortage is causing employers to find labourers from overseas.

The Future Is Within This Sector. Think Positively, Remember: Skill Is The Power. Skill Is The Honour.

Courses like IT, management and human resource management are far more attractive and popular. But there is a limited scope of jobs. For sectors such as construction and hospitality, the attraction is minimal, since the young adults are unwilling to train and work in these sectors. At the moment, this is one of the biggest challenges faced by industries.

How can these industries attract potential employees?
We need to spread awareness on a large scale among students, schools, the parents and other elders. We are aiming to launch the programme next year with the support of the industry.

When they work in the industry, they receive remuneration, which is highly motivating. But with awareness, the youth would be better educated on the opportunities that they have. Previously, we interacted solely with the students; the parents didn't realise what their child was following. We plan to involve parents in the future, so that the students will have their parents' encouragement and support as well.

What is in the future for NAITA?
Following the Minister's directions, we will focus on enrolment, improving the quality of our courses, rationalisation and digitalisation. As the first step, we will double the intake for the national institutes and apprenticeship.

We need to tie up with other countries for skilled labour export. At present, we receive about seven billion US dollars through our housemaids and labour force in Korea. If we convert these unskilled people, into skilled people, the revenue we will receive through our overseas labour force will increase.

The NAITA senior management believes that this is the future; we are ready and dedicated to offer our services. We are trying to create a skilful nation; we believe that skill is the power. Skill is the honour. Based on the two themes, with the

guidance of the government and ministers, we are ready to train almost all the youth in the country as well as the middle-aged citizens; if someone is unemployed we are going to train them and add value for their jobs. We will continue to strive to be the most important and renowned organisation in the country, not through talking but through action.

We are approaching the fourth industrial revolution. While everyone hopes for a white-collar job, no government in the world can deliver on this hope completely. We request the youth to consider a blue-collar job or a hard-skilled job. Right now, the world is seeing a skilled labour shortage of 40 million. In 2022, it is conjectured that the number will escalate up to 85 million worldwide. The future is within this sector. Think positively, remember: skill is the power. Skill is the honour.