US- or UK-based Degrees for our Children?

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It is that time of the year when we see advertisements for seminars in the newspapers asking us to come for a presentation on studying in this country or that. Our children are determined to go abroad. But where? Our probationary lecturers at our universities want to earn their research degrees for confirmation. But from where?

The Myths

Before taking up the question at hand, let me first address a common myth. That American degrees are intrinsically inferior is part of our bigotry. Comparisons of high school materials added to the prejudice – for instance a US college text will begin calculus which some of us did for advanced maths at the O. Levels. But this simplistic view does not account for the fact that the better US campuses, say in engineering, will not admit students who have not done calculus under “Advanced Placement” at high school. Nor does this view account for the fact that students at the better US campuses work a lot harder and do a lot of catching up while, comparatively, life on a campus in our system is like at a holiday camp. The bigotry also rests on the fact that up to perhaps our social meddling through the NCGE batch of the late 1970s standards here were high and American undergraduates seemed to lack the depth that ours had. A lot has changed since then – our VCs and Deans meeting recently in Anuradhapura concluded that our standards are substantially down. What they are not agreed on is why, although to many of us the reasons are lucid.

Complexity of the American System

A Sri Lankan Dean once told his partly American-qualified lecturer, “Your US master’s is lower than our special degree.” The ignorance underlies the bigotry at high places. For there is nothing tangible called a US master’s degree. There are US master’s degrees from MIT, Harvard, UC-Berkeley, etc. on the one hand which get their undergraduates from the top 10% of US high schools, and there are US master’s degrees from CalState, South Dakota, City University of New York, etc. on the other which reach into the bottom half of US high schools for their undergraduates. They are a class apart. And then there are degrees from so-called non-competitive US universities with open admission. Although the US provides a university to suit every mental level, it clearly does not mean that all US universities are bad.

Even within a university system there are differences – say a degree from CalState at Longbeach in Engineering is quite a bit better than from some of the sister campuses. At the same time, according to the LA Times, many undergraduates at CalState at Los Angeles are illiterate. Moreover, a master’s degree directed by a Nobel Laureate may be far superior to one from the same department in the same university directed by an un-tenured Assistant Professor. The American system is so complex that state universities like Wisconsin at Madison and Purdue, because of legislative mandates, must offer easy undergraduate admissions to in-state students, while they are power-houses in research and very difficult to get into as postgraduate students.

The failure to comprehend this complexity spawns more bigotry as we see some Sri Lankan students who did not perform well here going to the US and successfully earning postgraduate degrees. Many UK-trained academics here then find it comforting to assume incorrectly that anyone can get into an American university. However, a thoughtful examination of such cases of those who succeeded there but not here will show that such persons either a) succeeded at the lower level American universities or b) were really good students but were “screwed-up” by us teachers in this system and later on redeemed themselves by demonstrating their academic strengths through new opportunities and thereby winning difficult admission to the better American universities. A common route followed by such students is to get into a lower level university, come top in class there, and then use that to move to a research power-house. With such cases, it is more useful to analyse why we teachers in this system failed such students in identifying and developing their innate strengths than to ask why they succeeded in the US.

Indeed, much of the complexity probably goes now for the UK too. There was a time when a degree from one of the older British universities was considered better, but only slightly so, than
one from some of the newer ones. However, since Margaret Thatcher, every former Polytechnic now has styled itself a university with abysmal admissions standards. And their wares must surely be related to the clay they work with.

*The Right Question*

The right question, academically therefore, is not “Which system?” but “Which university?” The question “Which country?” is also relevant but only from a financial and cultural standpoint. Every degree must be judged on its own merits, especially postgraduate degrees.

A relevant thing to keep in mind, before you leave, if you have admission to a professional programme at the older universities here, is that it may be worthwhile doing it here, especially if it is in English. Remember that the more traditional programmes like civil engineering, mechanical engineering or power engineering, are still pretty world-class here and conducted in English, with engineering labs here being more extensive than in most other places. Any shortcomings are in the newer fields like computer engineering and computer science where the changes have been rapid. It is a fact that is rarely admitted for reasons of political correctness, that non-English speaking students, unless they go to certain faculties at Peradeniya and Colombo or to Moratuwa, are unlikely to come out fluent in English. That fluency will determine whether you will continue to grow as a scholar and person through continual reading, or stagnate. Seriously consider conserving the little money you have for postgraduate study after doing your bachelor’s degree here if you have the option at a desirable faculty.

If you are determined to go, remember, in Britain a first degree takes 3 years whereas in the US it takes 4. However, if you have done the London A.Levels along with your local exam, the chances are that a US university will let you off courses amounting almost to a year’s worth of work. Ask for universities that have allowed this – for it will be automatic there; otherwise you will have to make a case for the exemption.

US universities will quote fees that are typically higher than in the UK. At the same time, also keep in mind that if you are good, it is far easier to find a full scholarship in the US than in the UK. Even otherwise, with partial scholarships you will be able to find something that is cheaper than the UK. Remember also, especially if you are a rural student not too good in your English, that countries like the UK will particularly look only at your subject exam marks, but your having to do the SAT to go to the US will mean that your English will pull you down drastically. But then, there are very very few scholarships in the UK at undergraduate level and you probably need 4As to have a chance there.

When it comes to quality, I figure that the best US university is better than the best British university and likewise the worst US university is worse than the worst British university. What is particularly nice about the US is that if you go into a residential programme, however you may slip, the university that takes you in will work with you and try to make something out of you. For instance, there are mechanisms for alerting the Dean of Students (a kind of counsellor) when a student shows signs of failing and there are likely to be meetings between administrators, counsellors, and teachers to figure out why a student is not showing the performance they expected at the time of admission and come up with suitable remedies that will help him to come up to the required standard. Even if you run out of money they will try to make some mutually acceptable arrangement to enable you to graduate. This may, however, not be as true of the non-residential big-city US programmes where the administration will tend to be more impersonal.

Further, the undergraduate experience at a big UK university well known for research may be more pleasant than and far superior to that at a UK university whose lecturers are not the best scholars. But in the US, many (but not all) big research universities are, in ways the big British research universities are not. “Publications Factories” focused on research to the detriment of their undergraduate programmes. For example, you could be lost in a lecture for 1000 undergraduates carried into different rooms over TV at UC-Berkeley, which is said by some ratings to be the most powerful research university in the US.

At the same time, keep in mind that an effective lecturer usually does some research and therefore avoid universities that are not too proud of their research or do not list “Recent Publications” from the faculty in their catalogue – it is a sure sign that they have little to write about. Knowledge is ever growing. My late mother who obtained a first class London degree in mathematics in 1945 told me that she did not know enough to coach me for my A. Levels in 1969.
When as a final year engineering undergraduate in 1975 I skimmed through an uncle’s London engineering papers from 1952, I found that the mathematics questions were from my A. Levels. A good lecturer must therefore grow as a scholar, however stellar his performance might have been as an undergraduate in his early twenties. Exams test the ability to solve problems with unique solutions by known methods. But success at research evinces different skills – the ability to sail uncharted seas and self-learn and solve open ended problems with a multiplicity of solutions or even no exact solution but only “best solutions.” It is these skills in research that evidence our ability to be proper teachers, mastering new things on our own and teaching current knowledge.

To be fair, there may be persons capable of stellar research who, because of the nature of their duties as in a short-staffed department, do only teaching and do that well and as an overload by reading up on new developments without actually creating new knowledge. But from your perspective as an outsider looking for a good university, it is only publications that you can go by in identifying the universities with good teachers.

The Cultural Question
The cultural question also must be posed to complete the picture. Why go abroad? For some of us, it is to study. For others, it is to leave this country and seek greener pastures. If the latter is the case, then the US is the best bet. It is a big country with many opportunities. After earning a good degree at least at master’s level, it is not difficult to find a job that will give permanent residence rights there. The US now has increased its visa quotas for professionals and therefore for qualified persons it is possible to get a visa without employer sponsorship. But to get in as a student, you must demonstrate a likelihood of returning to the visa officer. Keep in mind though that legally there is nothing to prevent you from “changing your mind” after going there and seeing the opportunities available.

If you are a parent who is keen that your child should return, note that the more open the country and the less racially divided, the more the likelihood that the child will change and not wish to return home. This is more likely in the US than anywhere else. Although there is much racism there, the US has more inbuilt instruments of self-correction and self-examination than anywhere else. Particularly at undergraduate level on a residential American college campus, it is likely that your child will form lasting friendships with those white Americans who have no racial hang-ups. That is good and very much a part of the educational process. At the same time, that acceptance will come at the cost of acculturation and your child not wanting to return. Then there are places like London, and Staten Island and New York City where you can live like you were here making short trips out of your world into another just for purposes of attending classes. That will not give a proper education. Similar pressures on postgraduates are fewer because of their higher age group and the demand to be a workaholic to be successful at that level.

Generally those from happier homes where wealth was not badly missed, fair better and feel less pressured to transform their personality, put on bad imitations of the host country’s accent and such-like. That is, if you go out confident about who you are, you will remain who you are.

Other Countries
I have confined myself to the UK/US question not only because that is still the question for many but also because I have earned degrees from both systems and feel competent to speak with some authority. Australia is a country that many treat as an option and many of the things I have said of the UK I suspect will apply to Australia as well.

Then there are other options that must not be dismissed. Creatively we can make use of things we normally would not work with. I had a student who went to Papua New Guinea simply because fees there were the lowest and affordable for a Sri Lankan wage-earner. He followed up his PNG degree with a US master’s. This put him on par with someone who had done a US B.S. followed by a US M.S.. Russia and members of the former Federation are another option. Remember, Russia in science belongs to the big leagues. Moscow State University is rated higher than Oxford and Cambridge by the Gorman Report. Those from less prestigious Soviet universities too have done well by doing a UK M.Sc. to work off the prejudice. Similarly there was a Sri Lankan first class who got a scholarship to do a Ph.D. at Cambridge. He wanted to go to the US because he felt he would not be able to find work after his UK Ph.D.. I pointed out to him a) the advantages of the Cambridge tag; b) that he would finish his Ph.D. in 3 years in the UK whereas to get a place in the US he would need at least another year and then take as many as 6 years to finish;
and c) that he could always easily find a temporary research position in the US after his Cambridge Ph.D. and then if he used it as a base to find a regular position in the US he would still come out on top in terms of time. He took my advice.

State Policy Against Non-British Degrees

If you plan to return home, be mindful that state policy in this country discourages non-British graduates. While selection criteria do allow for non-British graduates, such criteria are typically cast in terms of that or this class for the first degree and then a catch-all “or equivalent qualifications.” These criteria mean that any American graduate and indeed any graduate from a system that does not award classes, however good, must have a special case made by the selection committee; even an MIT graduate with a GPA of 4.0 out of 4.0. Indeed, a German graduate who had done a degree that the German Central Office for Foreign Education had in a separate document certified as a master’s degree (really a first degree that is higher than our bachelor’s and one that they deemed as a master’s degree) was independently told by 8 separate university interview panels that they had doubts about his degree’s authenticity. Ignorance begets prejudice.

In fact I would rate an MIT graduate with a GPA of 3.0/4.0 (close to our second lower) as preferable for a rapidly changing field like Computer Science right now over our first class graduate in Computer Science because our syllabi tend to need extensive improvement and the exposure that Sri Lankan Computer Science graduates receive to new technology is inadequate. I would even extend this preference to BA graduates from the top US universities who are far better read than our “mother-tongue-tied” graduates and therefore better able to upgrade themselves.

The pro-British bias by an establishment peopled by a British-trained bureaucracy seems to say arrogantly “Those just like ourselves, our clones, are great; all others are lousy.” Albeit comic, how degrees are compared at the UGC for university lecturers shows the bias. By our selection and advancement criteria, we academics always refuse to accept an Indian first degree as equivalent to the Sri Lankan first degree that most of us in the system have and we advance elaborate arguments on why that should be so. We have refused to accept even an Indian graduate with a good class and 2 master’s degrees as an equal. At the same time, because most of us have a British Ph.D., we refuse even to discuss if a US Ph.D. is superior to or at least more appropriate for our purposes than a British Ph.D.! That a US Ph.D. takes longer, has no fixed duration, and involves, as preparation for the research, advanced training in a broad range of courses and therefore makes a university lecturer a more effective teacher than one with only research training in a narrow field as in a fixed-length British Ph.D. is something that continues to evade discussion. So does the validity or otherwise of Sri Lankan Ph.D.s. and their standing in relation to other Ph.D.s. The excuse for our low research output – and many will agree – is that because of bureaucratic inefficiency it takes twice as long to do something here as in the West. Then, is a 2-year M.Phil. from here to be treated as the equivalent of a 2-year M.Phil. from the UK or is it only as half as good? Likewise, whether a Ph.D. in disciplines like engineering from the relatively technologically advanced US is superior to one from the U.K. because one can do more in the US in the same time and has direct exposure there to the latest technology, also defies discussion.

These are problems that will persist for some time. Until we have a critical mass of non-British-trained administrators, those returning home will face difficulties in the state-sector.

Summary

If you plan to be in the private sector or work abroad, research the prospective universities carefully and choose a university that will truly train you, be it from the British system or the American system. But if you wish to return home after your studies and if you plan a university or government career, lean towards a country under the British system only to avoid the prejudices and bigotry you will face.

Whatever you choose, “All the best!”

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