

THE DAWN OF A LEGACY

REMINISCENCES FROM THE VISIONARY LEADER

PROF. E. A. WEERASINGHE
VICE-CHANCELLOR, NSBM GREEN UNIVERSITY

“ WHEN WE DO SOMETHING NEW, WE FACE MANY CHALLENGES; THAT IS NATURAL. HOWEVER, A LEADER SHOULD HAVE THE STRENGTH TO FACE THEM WITH GRACE AND AN IRON-WILL. A SUCCESSFUL LEADER SHOULD BE ABLE TO HANDLE BOTH INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL CHALLENGES ”

What inspired you to establish this iconic university?

The concept of NSBM Green University crossed my mind when I was the Director General at the National Institute of Business Management (NIBM). At that time, the role of NIBM was to conduct professional courses; we went beyond that and established NIBM as a degree awarding institute. After a while, we found it impossible to cater to the needs of our students with the limited resources and infrastructure available. I was personally never satisfied

about a learning environment in which the students were confined to a classroom. I always thought a proper graduate cannot be produced in such an environment because learning goes beyond the four walls of a classroom. So, I thought of developing a fully-fledged university complex and submitted a proposal to the academic governing council. Initially, many considered it an unrealistic dream, but I was not discouraged. I must appreciate the constant support provided by Hon. Minister Dallas Alahapperuma, who was in-charge of our ministry at the time; the guidance and support



extended by him when securing cabinet approvals was extremely encouraging. After getting the approval, we were able to secure a land thanks to Hon. Minister Dr. Bandula Gunawardane.

While we were in the process of designing the Green University Town, I visited some well-known universities such as Harvard and MIT,

with a few directors at NIBM, in hopes of gaining inspiration to design an iconic university compatible with the demands of the 21st century. Along with the smooth running design process, came the issue of funding such a massive project; with the aid of Hon. Minister Dallas Alahapperuma, we were provided with a treasury guarantee through which we were able to

process a loan. With the financial strength gained, I was able to initiate the construction of NSBM.

What were the main challenges you faced at the inception of this university?

When we do something new, we face many challenges; that is natural. However, a leader should have the



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strength to face them with grace and an iron-will. A successful leader should be able to handle both internal and external challenges.

Speaking of challenges, I must mention that working with 12 ministers during the past five years was quite challenging. Usually, with every new appointment of ministers, the governing bodies of institutions running under the respective ministries changed. Fortunately, I never had to face such a situation, for all the ministers appointed noticed the hard work and effort I had put into successfully completing this risky, yet rewarding initiative. Moreover, the decision to establish such a project in the suburbs of Homagama was criticized since many were under the assumption that students wouldn't prefer to choose such a distant location to pursue their tertiary education. In order to overcome this challenge, we

rented out a building in Nugegoda and commenced our operations. In fact, we were lucky enough to expand ourselves in this initial stage thanks to the increased demand for our degree programmes and student satisfaction.

Despite all the barriers, we were able to commence the official functions of NSBM Green University at Homagama, with the participation of 4000 students already studying at Nugegoda. I must note that there were no concerns from the students' end as predicted by denigrators, since we provided luxury transport facilities free of charge. Today, I am so proud of the accomplishment we have achieved; We built a state-of-the-art university with all the required facilities for students; a university which wasn't limited to a single building, but a university town that comprised of all the essential units such as a supermarket, a bank,



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playground, gym, several canteens, and even a press.

Currently, we are providing education for students whose parents are renowned academics in state universities. I believe that we have been able to reach such huge success within a short span of time for doing things right. I am very proud of our successful journey which has already left a positive impact on the entire tertiary education in Sri Lanka.

How concerned are you when recruiting employees for NSBM?

Unlike other government universities, where thousands of non-academic staff are being

employed, here at NSBM, we only have around one-hundred. I must say that they all do their tasks quite well and contribute towards the smooth management of the institution. We have never recruited academic staff under any political influence; in fact, we deploy a rigorous mechanism to recruit academic staff in order to ensure that we recruit the cream of the crop. Even during this pandemic, we have been able to maintain the quality of education with the support of both academic and non-academic staff members. We have been conducting online lectures ever since the rise of the pandemic and I haven't received a single complaint regarding the delivery of lectures to date. We strive to keep the processes and practices

quintessential for an educational organization running at their best even during such trying times.

As the Vice Chancellor of this university, you are truly playing the role of a visionary leader. As you believe, how have you acquired these leadership skills? How have you acquired the strength of facing challenges and making the impossible, possible?

I believe that leadership is really a skill to be mastered. I remember the time when I was doing my PhD in Japan;



my professor was so appreciative of me and said that I was eligible for the PhD, even before the submission of the final thesis, because I already had the practical knowledge required. I got the opportunity to visit many countries with him and therefore was highly exposed to international standards. I learnt a lot and gained vast experience during the time I was in Japan; the management style, the discipline, and the customer-care service in Japan was of a very high standard. I believe that I was greatly influenced by that exposure.

When accepting a position, one should think whether they have enough confidence to accept it. Confidence stems from knowledge and experience, not from political backing. As the Vice Chancellor of NSBM, I never gave in to external influences. I have never recruited our academic staff under the influence of anyone; any talented individual is given an opportunity at our university. Candidates do not need the support of any politician or political party to get a job opportunity at NSBM; those who are talented and accomplished are always welcome at our institute. I do my job well not with

the intention of gaining fame or special credit, but with the hopes of creating a better future for the next generation. During my tenure, I will do my best.

I started my career as a statistician at the Department of Census and Statistics. Then in 1985, I joined the University of Sri Jayewardenepura and then worked my way up from an Assistant Lecturer to the Head. After completing my Master's and PhD, I was offered the Director General position at NIBM. I held that position for 12 long years, setting the longest track record for a Director General in Sri Lanka. I never wanted to be a Vice-Chancellor of an existing university; I wanted to build a university and be part of the future. I see this as a great accomplishment that cannot be achieved by everyone. Regardless of the success we have gained within such a short period of time, I must note that we have not reached the comfort zone yet. I continue to hold the position of Vice-Chancellor, as the right leadership is integral to stabilize our position further.

This is a fully-fledged university with a

beautiful surrounding. These are the factors we have been marketing so far, but now it's time to move forward. Facing challenges is part of our daily routine; the pandemic for example, appeared out of the blue and still influences our daily lives. We need to always be proactive and strategic. The moment we step into the comfort zone under the assumption that everything is running smoothly, we start losing focus and stability. I firmly believe that everyone should be dreamers; and everyone should work towards achieving the dreams. The minute people stop dreaming, they stop succeeding in their lives. People should always endeavour to be creative and innovative; they should always try to think out of the box. I am fortunate to have a talented team that is eager to implement my ideas in practice.

How strongly do you believe in the impact of a peaceful learning environmental on student learning?

I firmly believe that it is imperative for students to have an environment that is conducive for studying. In the Phase



“EVERYTHING IS CHANGING AND EVOLVING AND IF WE WANT TO STAY IN THE GAME, WE NEED TO KEEP UPDATING OURSELVES AS WELL. AS A SRI LANKAN, I BELIEVE THAT I HAVE SERVED AND FULFILLED MY RESPONSIBILITY TO MY MOTHERLAND. I ENCOURAGE THE YOUNG GENERATION TO USE THEIR TIME WISELY, TO PLAN THEIR FUTURE, AND REACH ACCOMPLISHMENTS STEP BY STEP. THERE ARE NO SHORT-CUTS TO SUCCESS. THERE WILL BE SEVERAL UPS AND DOWNS IN LIFE AND EACH OF THOSE BITTER-SWEET EXPERIENCES WILL CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS CREATING A BETTER LEADER. I WOULD ALSO LIKE TO ADVISE OUR YOUNG GENERATION NOT TO BE VICTIMS OF THE NEGATIVITY PROJECTED BY SOCIETY AND BY CERTAIN RELIGIOUS, POLITICAL, OR ETHNIC LEADERS. WE SHOULD ALWAYS LOOK AT LIFE POSITIVELY, EMBRACE IT, AND STRIVE TO MAKE THE BEST OUT OF IT”

II, we plan to make further improvements; I believe that a peaceful, natural surrounding would benefit our students greatly. The modern infrastructure and amenities provided at NSBM are also fundamental in creating a learner-friendly mindset. I must appreciate our students' positive attitudes while noting that none of them have damaged the property within these sacred grounds. We, as a university dedicated to nurture the future generation, firmly believe in the maintenance of discipline. We make sure to gift career-ready professionals to the society adept in both academics and social skills by instilling positive attitudes throughout their undergraduate life.

How do you envision the future of NSBM?

A university is a sacred place that instils knowledge, values, and attitudes. This university will survive for many years to come and will provide guidance and support to thousands of students. The progress we have made within the short time span of five years as a higher educational institute is exemplary in comparison to that of other

long-standing universities in Sri Lanka. One of our latest achievements is the approval of our PhD programme conducted in affiliation with foreign academics. I believe that the implementation of the PhD programme at NSBM will be highly beneficial for our own academics and other professionals in their journeys towards success. In fact, one of the prominent elements in the upcoming five-year plan, along with the completion of Phase II, is the further improvement of the standard of education; the development of the internal academic staff is one major element of focus.

As an extraordinary leader who turned a new chapter in the modern higher education system, what message do you have for the young generation?

The first thing I should highlight is that the world is changing; people are evolving. There was once a time where students believed and accepted their lecturers' teachings without question. However, the modern generation no longer blindly

trusts in someone else's words; they would make sure to double-check facts and gather additional information. The current job market also seeks for all-rounders equipped with both professional qualifications and practical knowledge. Everything is changing and evolving and if we want to stay in the game, we need to keep updating ourselves as well. As a Sri Lankan, I believe that I have served and fulfilled my responsibility to my motherland. I encourage the young generation to use their time wisely, to plan their future, and reach accomplishments step by step. There are no short-cuts to success. There will be several ups and downs in life and each of those bitter-sweet experiences will contribute towards creating a better leader. I would also like to advise our young generation not to be victims of the negativity projected by society and by certain religious, political, or ethnic leaders. We should always look at life positively, embrace it, and strive to make the best out of it.

By Gayanthi Mendis & Roshni Samarasinghe