

Address at the CVCD Awards ceremony at the BMICH on 02 September 2022

Good evening!

Mr. Nihal Ranasinghe, Secretary, Ministry of Education
Prof. Sampath Amaratunga, Chairman, University Grants Commission
Prof. Nilanthi de Silva, Chairperson, CVCD, Vice-Chancellors and Rectors
Esteemed CVCD Awards winners
Distinguished invitees
Ladies and gentlemen

I consider it a singular honour to have been invited to address this august assembly where outstanding academics are recognised for their remarkable accomplishments in S&T and allied fields. It is indeed rare to see such a galaxy of high-profile, luminous personalities, including the Secretary to the Ministry of Education, the Chairman of the UGC, Vice-Chancellors, brilliant academics of exceptional performance and other luminaries under one roof, and I express my deep appreciation to the Chairperson and members of the CVCD for the rare opportunity afforded to me.

Former British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli said that a university is a place of light, liberty and learning; however, it can remain so only as long as its staff can claim a place on the frontiers of knowledge, and continue to take part in moving their country forward through their scholarly pursuits. Besides being the fountainheads of new knowledge, the universities should also be pinnacles of culture, crucibles for R&D, habitats for innovation and invention and seedbeds of novel enterprises. The recognition of a university depends principally on the quality of their staff - that is, how well recognized they are in their respective fields at home and abroad, how well their work is received in the outside world, and the quality of their contribution to the community and to the society at large.

As you are aware, there are 17 universities and 7 postgraduate institutes within the purview of the UGC, which are endowed with over 6,500 academics, including over 1,000 professors and associate professors, about 2,500 senior lecturers, and around 75,000 undergraduates who are the distilled spirit, the cream of the cream, of the youth of our country. The universities — as knowledge-producing and knowledge-disseminating institutions, producers of human capital and wealth creators – can and should play a pivotal role in the development of our nation.

When we look at the intellectual landscape of our universities, we see a range of "mountains", that have silently, unobtrusively and selflessly contributed greatly to the noble task of nation building. The nation and the society, unfortunately, are only poorly aware of their worth, and they remain the unsung academic heroes of our country. However, they persist with fulfilling their obligation to the nation even under most trying circumstances, because of their relentless passion for intellectual work and scholarly pursuits, and their love and affection for the motherland.

Dear CVCD award winners, you are the heart and soul of the university sector. You are the gems and jewels in the crown of Sarasavi Matha and the most treasured resource of our university system. You have set benchmarks of excellence and new standards for our academic community and the country. Your passion and perseverance have inspired us all. We take great pride in your dedication and devotion to excellence. I am certain that Sarasavi Matha is elated and proud of your remarkable accomplishments, and that she is shedding tears of joy on this occasion and would crave many more sons and daughters of your calibre and stature. I salute you for your outstanding achievements and invaluable contributions in your respective fields. I congratulate each of you from the bottom of my heart.

Dear Award Winners, we should very much like to see your academic dynamism and intellectual vibrancy becoming contagious, thereby infecting more and more staff who will acquire and internalize your qualities and attributes to attain excellence in education, research, and service to the community.

Thomas Alva Edison said: "Genius is 1% inspiration and 99% perspiration." Edison was hard of hearing since his early teens and attended school for only for a few months and was taught at home by his mother. This curious and creative child later invented the phonograph and the gramophone, the light bulb, and the motion picture camera, and had more than 1,000 patents to his credit. Edison personified perseverance - the capacity to stand up again and again after every fall, and to keep moving forward. Samuel Johnson said, "Great works are performed not by strength, but by perseverance." Newton said, "If I have seen farther than others, it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants." We need to learn from these geniuses. We know that there is no shortcut to distinction or excellence. We also know that diamonds are only coal put under immense pressure.

The intellectual prowess and creative power of Sri Lankans are not second to those of any other people in the world. There are children and young scientists amongst us who can be another Stephen Hawking or Edison. But, it is incumbent upon us to create and sustain a nurturing, stimulating and conducive environment so that they will fully blossom and express their innate and inborn potential to the benefit of self, community and humanity at large. We need to make our universities crucibles where ordinary talent is transformed into extraordinary talent and extraordinary talent into genius. It is our cherished dream to see more and more imposing Sri Lankan mountains emerge on the global intellectual landscape. We hope that this awards scheme will make a tangible contribution towards that end.

We are well aware that our country is going through a crisis, unprecedented in our history since independence, with far-reaching economic and social implications. As academics, scientists, administrators and professionals in senior positions in academia and public sector institutions whose education has been supported by the community, we have a moral obligation and an inescapable responsibility to contribute our might to overcome the crisis and rebuild the economy.

The late Christopher Weeramantry, former Vice-President of the International Court of Justice, The Hague, Netherlands and Emeritus Professor of Law at the Monash University, Australia, identified four key functions of an intellectual:

1. The continuing acquisition and systematization of knowledge
2. The advancement of knowledge
3. The communication of knowledge
4. Advice and guidance based upon knowledge.

Many of our scientists fulfill the first three, but hardly meet the fourth one. This is one reason why Sri Lanka still remains as a developing country despite its high literacy rate, high human development index, rich natural endowments and strategic location. Georges Clemenceau, Prime Minister of France during the World War I, said “**War is too important a matter to be left to the Generals**”. I could say without fear of contradiction that “**Development is even more a matter to be left entirely to politicians**”. Therefore, the scientists, professionals and intellectuals of the country should weld themselves into a cohesive and vibrant force to serve as a guiding star and navigate the destiny of our nation to usher in a better tomorrow for our people and posterity.

As most of the key movers and shakers of the higher education sectors of our country, including the Secretary of Education, the Chairman of the UGC, Vice-Chancellors and a cross section of the accomplished academics, are present on this occasion, I wish to seize this opportunity to share some of my thoughts at this crucial juncture for your kind reflection and intervention.

Today technology is the prime driver of and the key to economic development and universities contribute over 60% of the R&D personnel in the country, thus they become the brains trust and intellectual pulse of the nation. With well-equipped laboratories, well-stocked libraries and good IT infrastructure facilities, they also constitute the backbone of a knowledge economy. However, the weak link between academia and R&D institutions in our country poses a constraint to sharing of human and physical resources across institutional boundaries. Such inter-institutional collaboration, besides producing synergy and complementarity, will facilitate rationalization of high-end equipment and minimize duplication of expensive equipment and their downtime.

Presently, universities and many R&D institutions come within the purview of the Ministry of Education and its Secretary Mr. Ranasinghe is already acting to bring together all compartmentalized and insulated R&D institutions in the Ministry onto one platform and thereby promote effective use and sharing of their human, physical and financial assets for national development. We very much welcome and appreciate this strategic move.

The NSF in keeping with its mandate has set up two digital bases, namely the Global Digital Platform and high-end analytical, research and testing instrument database. The former is aimed at harnessing high-profile Sri Lankan expatriates for national development with a special focus on the higher education and R&D sectors while the latter, at providing reliable analytical and testing services and research support to academia, R&D institutions, and industry; this will obviate the duplication of high-end equipment, and facilitate and promote public-private partnerships and

research by universities and institutions, particularly those lacking the requisite analytical facilities and competencies. However, there is still much room for expanding the two databases to administer a turbo boost to research and innovation in the country. It is imperative to unify the relevant institutions into one ecosystem in order to derive potential benefits from them. In this connection, forging a strategic tri-partite partnership between the UGC, CVCD and NSF will be mutually rewarding and reinforcing, and leading to a win-win situation for all. I am certain that this will receive due attention of the Chairman of the UGC, Prof. Sampath Amaratunga who is a champion in bringing down walls and building strategic bridges, partnerships and networks to enhance the higher education sector of the country.

It is valuable to set goals in life. I think it will be even more valuable to set goals that are seemingly unattainable. Michelangelo said “The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it, but that it is too low and we reach it”. It is, therefore, important to set lofty goals and work with perseverance, persistence and perspiration (the 3Ps) to attain them. Confucius said “By nature, people are similar, through nurture, they become distinct”. As mentioned before, the IQ, EQ or CQ (Creativity Quotient) of Sri Lankans are second to none in the world and despite many constraints and challenges, 25 Sri Lankan scientists have reached the top 2% in the world, and with a conducive and enabling environment they could easily reach the top 1% cohort. Hong Kong-based scientists Kwok-Yung Yuen and Sri Lanka’s Joseph Sriyal Malik Peiris won the prize in life sciences in the 2021 Future Science Prize dubbed “China Nobel Prize” for their major discoveries of SAR-CoV-1 as the causative agent of the global SARS outbreak in 2003 with impact on combating COVID-19 and emerging infectious diseases. With an imposing cultural heritage and rich civilization, our aim should be to produce Nobel Laureates from Sri Lanka before 2050.

The NSF, being a hub institution, it is only too happy to go the extra mile to mobilize and channel the requisite high-profile Sri Lankan expatriate scientists, technologists and professionals across the globe to build strategic world-class multidisciplinary research teams in Sri Lanka so as to promote cutting edge research. This would lead to wealth creation through innovation and even to the production of Nobel Laureates in the long run.

The present CVCD Chairperson, Prof. Nilanthi de Silva is a world-class scientist in the top 2%; she also an institution builder. I am confident that her able and visionary leadership will afford a new direction and dimension to the CVCD, making it a robust guiding force and a potent catalyst of the higher education sector of the country, propelling it to greater heights. I wish her and the members of the CVCD all the success in their endeavours to advance the cause of higher education in Sri Lanka. Thank you.

Prof. Ranjith Senaratne
Chairman, National Science Foundation
02.09.2022