

CENTENARY CELEBRATIONS OF HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES EDUCATION

BETTER OPPORTUNITIES FOR HSS GRADUATES



Prof. ASANTHA U. ATTANAYAKE

t was an eye opener to be able to listen to some of the discussions and presentations held at the centenary celebrations of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS) education in Sri Lanka. While applauding the efforts taken by the Committee for its efforts during these testing times, the whole endeavour demands us to look at the HSS education in Sri Lanka with a renewed outlook in terms of the views coming from different subject specialists of HSS education from all HSS graduates. the universities in the country.

The intention of this article is not to discuss the crisis that HSS education is going through globally or locally due to HSS graduate output that is perceived as not being 'marketable'. As it was deliberated and understood by many according to their own degree of understanding, this article is to add to the discussion why the crisis is doubled for Sri Lankan HSS graduates and reasons for it in my view.

I think everyone can be on the same page when we say there is a lack of employment opportunities for graduates of all disciplines in the country (at least other than those in medical faculties) owing to the pandemic crisis. Given the service-oriented economy that is completely divorced from a manufacturing economy, graduates belonging to all other disciplines face unemployment issues. It was stated at the forum that about 60% of the engineering graduate output is employed abroad. This shows we as a nation do not have an economy that can absorb the knowledge of the engineers we produce nor are able to give them goodenough working conditions or remuneration.

A large majority of the output of Agriculture Faculties do not contribute to the agriculture sector in the country as well owing to the society detaching from its agricultural base. These students end up being agriculture teachers in a classroom wasting much of the capital spent on their university education. Therefore, the lack of a robust economy is the indisputable main reason for graduate (un)employment in the country. In addition to the common reasons for discipline, HSS graduates have several other too. reasons that are specific to them. Some of the reasons that were highlighted at the forum were, society not being able to absorb HSS graduates into the labour force, the economy not having employment opportunities created

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for HSS graduates, a mismatch between the employer expectations and the graduate competencies, etc., all of which have been worsened by the existing pandemic.

While all of these issues play significant roles undoubtedly for HSS graduate unemployment, my intention of writing this article is to discuss a reason that was not highlighted enough, in my view, at the centenary celebration discussions. Even though I tried to discuss it during the concluding sessions, it was not possible given the limited time factor as well as it being considered perhaps not very significant. It is the crucial role played by the English language proficiency (or lack thereof) in the lives of

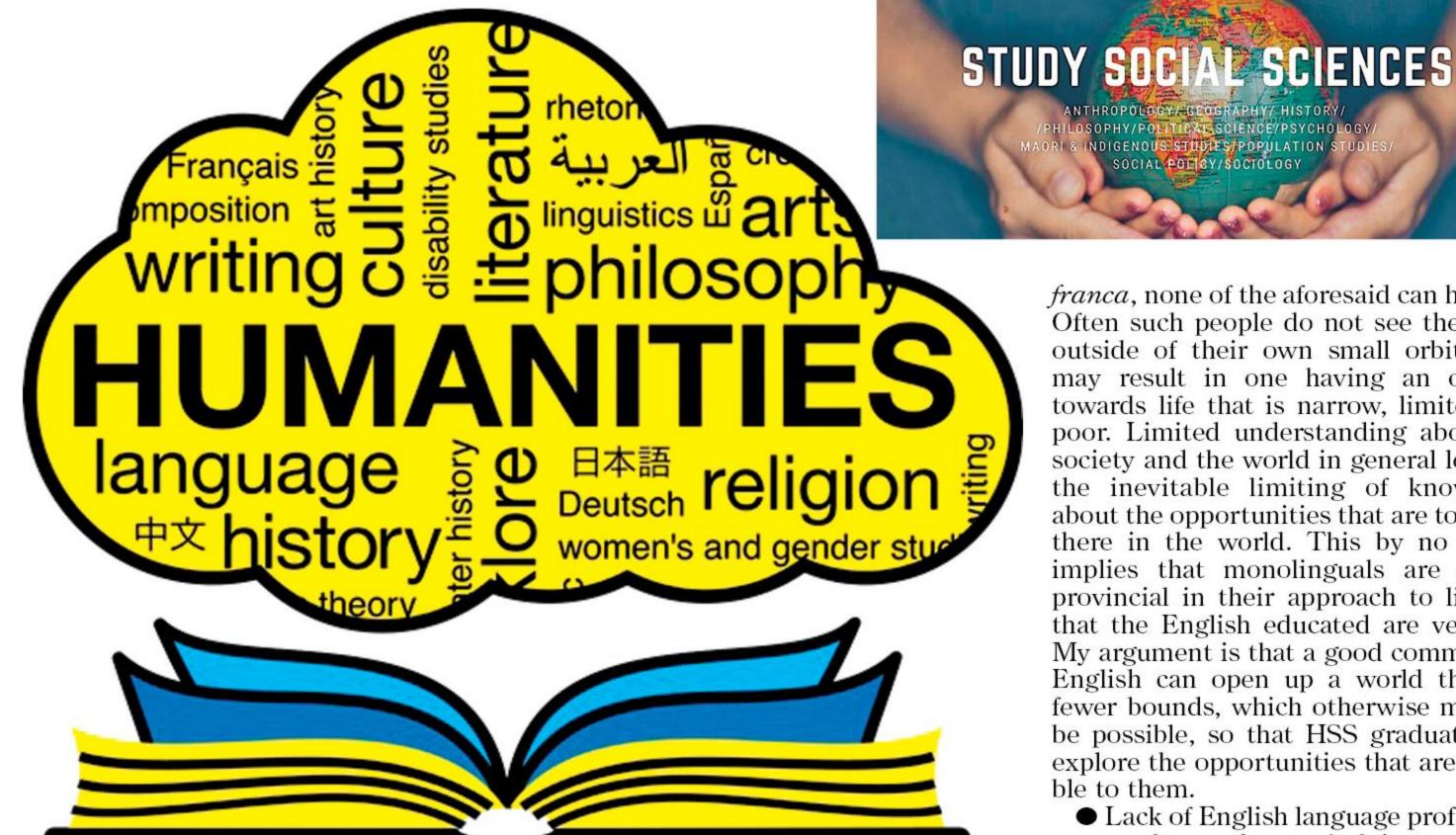
Job security

I must say that the survey conducted by Professor Emeritus, Siddhisena and his team with a large sample of graduates and graduands during the heights of pandemic was very impressive. And that too within a span of 4-5 months. A majority of HSS graduates wait long periods for employment after graduation and many do not seek employment in the private sector as they want to be employed in the public sector as has been well known for decades. This is still valid as a Professor and the team showed us with solid data. The reasons discussed for this were job security, the provision of a pension and comparatively relaxed working conditions as opposed to the working conditions without a pension in the private sector. However, in my opinion, the interpretations have missed one crucial point.

A lack of English language proficiency limits the avenues for HSS graduate employment greatly. In my view, this has many facets to it. If the study checked the medium of instruction in the degree programmes the graduates followed, the data may have given another picture. As a professional in the field of English language education with 20 years of experience in the university setup, before I was forced to leave the country due to harassment on the part of the current University of Colombo Vice-Chancellor, this is my two cents vis-àvis the scenario. Opposite views with reasonable justifications are welcome and facts provgraduate unemployment irrespective of their en and disputed through research are welcome

Psycho-social factors

The points I make here deal with the psycho-social factors associated with HSS gradu-





ates being (un)able to communicate in English.

• Without a sound knowledge in English language, the worldview of the graduates is limited thus restricting their horizon of available opportunities.

It is understood that knowing another language broadens one's horizons. This is because a language does not simply mean a set of words or combinations of phonological sounds. Language is culture. Being able to communicate in another language is to be aware of another culture. If that language is English, the language spoken by most in the globe at present, that

means being aware of many cultures, not only the western culture. This is because the knowledge of many cultures is transmitted through English as many nations in the globe communicate in English. In addition, written work in many languages is translated into English.

When a person has the ability to use English, it is like having a free ticket to many continents. He/she can access a plethora of written material and recorded material from across the globe. Also, he/ she can communicate with people of diverse nationalities who have the same free ticket. English language is a bridge that helps people cross many barriers, including the barriers of misunderstanding among people, nations and disciplines. In short, knowing English enriches a person with a knowledge that is second to none, if he/she knows how to utilize it. As a result, the outlook one has towards life and the world can change drastically.

When one does not have the ability to communicate in English, the linguafranca, none of the aforesaid can happen. Often such people do not see the world outside of their own small orbit. This may result in one having an outlook towards life that is narrow, limited and poor. Limited understanding about the society and the world in general leads to the inevitable limiting of knowledge about the opportunities that are to be out there in the world. This by no means implies that monolinguals are always provincial in their approach to life and that the English educated are versatile. My argument is that a good command in English can open up a world that has fewer bounds, which otherwise may not be possible, so that HSS graduates can explore the opportunities that are available to them.

 Lack of English language proficiency may make graduates feel insecure and inferior for any job in the private sector.

English is considered "kaduwa" sword (Thiru Kandiah, 1981) to depict its power. Those who are in possession of this weapon enjoy the power it possesses. Unfortunately, those who do not have this weapon may feel insecure and inferior and in university settings we see this manifested in false superiority complexes. Those who speak English are subjected to severe ragging and junior students are being discouraged in their efforts to use English outside the classroom situation by seniors (who are unable to communicate in English), etc. However, once out of the university as graduates, this inferiority complex returns in its full form when most HSS graduates avoid applying for private sector employment even if they must wait for 1-2 years for public sector employment. This is because they feel inadequate for private sector employment that increasingly requires a good command of Eng-

(The writer is a Visiting Associate Professor, Ohio State University, USA)