

SPECIAL ARTICLE

An Assessment of the Quality of Faculty in Humanities and Social Sciences in the Public University System in Sri Lanka

Dr. Sujata N. Gamage¹, educationforum.lk
PhD(Univ. of British Columbia) MPA (Ohio State Univ.)
Director, Knowledge Networks, LIRNEasia
12 Balcombe Place
Colombo

Abstract

In a global knowledge society assessment of university teachers necessarily has to involve global benchmarks, but, universities in developing countries need to be realistic in their selection of benchmarks. In this study we assess the current performance of faculty members in humanities and social science in the public university system in Sri Lanka in terms of the post-graduate qualifications, rank and international publications of individual faculty members and benchmark their performance relative to their counterparts in three selected Asian universities. The results are presented in the form of a faculty quality score card and a faculty quality ranking report for the public university system in Sri Lanka,

Introduction

Universities are first and foremost places for learning, learning by students as well as teachers. University teachers not only should be able to “link and synthesize general developments in a subject, using the insights gained from well-developed powers of critical appraisal”(Newby, 1999), but they should continue to be “occupied in learning” and “apply their learning to teaching”. As an educator famously remarked:

1. This report was prepared at the request of the Standing Committee on Humanities and Social Sciences at the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka. The work was funded by the 2003 Research on Knowledge Systems (RoKS) program at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) of Canada through a grant awarded to Dr. Sujata Gamage as the principal investigator and the University Grants Commission as the implementing authority. Any technical questions should be directed to sujatagamage@yahoo.com.

“He who learns from one occupied in learning, drinks of a running stream. He who learns from one who has learned all he is to teach, drinks “the green mantle of the stagnant pool” (Scott, 1851)

How would we know if the university teachers have the desired attributes? Using several well-established surveys as guides,² we selected “*post-graduate qualifications*” and the “*rank*” of each faculty member as indicators of the extent to which a faculty body is able to “link and synthesize general developments in a subject,” and the percent of faculty members with “*internationally published scholarly works*” as a proxy indicator of a faculty body that is “occupied in learning.”³

As for “application of learning to teaching”, we decided to separate that from other faculty quality attributes and include quality of teaching as part of an “academic quality report” that captures all quality dimensions.⁴

Two types of reports are useful in presenting performance indicators to parents, students, funders, policymakers and other stakeholders of higher education – Score cards and rankings.

Scorecards have their origins in the business world but are now increasingly used by universities. A scorecard for an academic programme, institution, or a system of institutions typically presents performance data in reference to a selected set of performance targets for each key institutional or system goal. Performance targets are typically set using data for a benchmark university or programme.

A benchmark university or a programme is one that is similar in circumstances but is performing better than one’s own institution or programme. In the present study we

² Times Good University Guide, UK; Guardian University Guide, UK; Good Universities Guides, Australia; America’s Best Colleges by US News and World Report (USNWR); and Top 10 Colleges of India for five fields of study, by India Today.

³ This criterion does not devalue scholarly works in the local languages or works that have only local relevance. However, it is difficult to judge the quality of such works unless the author can point to some form of recognition for his/her work by a larger group of peers. Sri Lankan academia is too small to have a credible peer-group in any one research area.

⁴ All reputable surveys look at the quality of teaching separate from quality of faculty, likely because of difficulty of measuring that attribute. The Guardian survey gives 65% of the score to teaching assessment scores received by an institution. Other surveys use proxy indicators to evaluate the quality of teaching.

selected universities of Dhaka, Malaya and Hong Kong as benchmarks because all three institutions ranked above University of Colombo, the only Sri Lankan university to be included in the Asia week Survey of 2000.⁵

Availability of data was another factor.⁶ We chose a time frame of 3-years to achieve performance targets.

In terms of post-graduate qualifications, we set the benchmark for “faculty with PhDs” at 50% after noting that even University of Dhaka, the university closest in ranking to University of Colombo in the Asia Week survey, had 47% of faculty holding PhDs while University of Colombo had only 37%. Universities of Malaya and Hong Kong showed 43% and 90%, respectively (Figure 1). With the average for the Sri Lankan university system at 30%⁷ and the total number of Humanities and Social Science (H&SS) faculty in the system being close to 1000, this means that the Sri Lankan system needs 200 more PhDs to reach the lower end of regional benchmarks on faculty qualifications.

We set the desired level of “faculty holding PhDs from a local university” at no more than 10% since the current level is 8%, and in our estimates, given the current capacity,⁸ it would be hard to graduate more than 20 PhDs (or realize a 2% increase

⁵ The rankings were as follows: University of Hong Kong, 3; University of Malaya, 47; University of Dhaka, 64; and University of Colombo, 77; from among a group of 77 multidisciplinary universities surveyed.

⁶ 50 Universities from 10 countries from developing Asia were included in Asia Week Survey (Bangladesh, 1; India, 8; Indonesia, 4; China, 16; Malaysia, 5; Pakistan, 3; Philippines, 4; Thailand, 7; Sri Lanka, 1; Vietnam, 1). We initially focused on countries that made available their university data through the Commonwealth Universities Year Book (Bangladesh, India, Malaysia and Pakistan). Indian universities were not considered as benchmarks because the existence of satellite colleges made Indian universities structurally different from Sri Lankan universities. We selected Bangladesh and Malaysia over Pakistan because of greater familiarity with the former two systems. Hong Kong was selected to get a sense of the upper limit of performance for a university in an Asian country.

⁷ Sri Lankan numbers are from the 2004/5 survey of H&SS faculty conducted by the Standing Committee on H&SS at the UGC.

⁸ According to the 2004/5 H&SS survey, of the 85 professors in H&SS, 21 reported publishing in an international journal in the last five years, and 10 of the 61 associate professors did. Together, that gives 31 faculty members (out of a faculty body of 937) with the potential to supervise PhDs. According to a study on Research & Research Training in Sri Lanka by Upali Samrajeewa (2003, published by UGC), during 1991-2000 the number of PhDs produced in the Arts stream averaged at 2.5 per year. If we double the number to take into account the new initiatives by the UGC’s research promotion center, we can estimate that it is possible to produce 15-20 local PhDs during the next 3 years (2006-2008).

in the production of PhDs), locally within the next 3 years. This means that the system needs 180 more PhDs with foreign qualifications within the next three years.

Since we set the performance target for faculty with PhDs at 50%, the target for faculty holding a masters degree as the higher qualification becomes 50% by default. Currently 44% of the faculty hold masters degrees as their highest post-graduate qualification with 19% of those having received a masters from the same university that they are employed in. If we leave aside issues of quality of the masters degrees received, the Sri Lankan university system is close to the performance target in terms of masters degree holders.

In summary, our estimate is that Sri Lankan universities may train 20 PhDs locally in the next three years but 180 additional PhDs are needed to reach the level of even University of Dhaka.

UGC is on the right track in having dedicated Rs.60 million in 2005 for training 60 new PhDs in H & SS, Management, and Education and Law (**Error! Bookmark not defined.**). With continued funding and annual increases, it should be possible for Sri Lankan universities to have enough PhD trainees in the pipeline within the next three years, and reach minimum regional standards in faculty qualifications within 5-6 years.

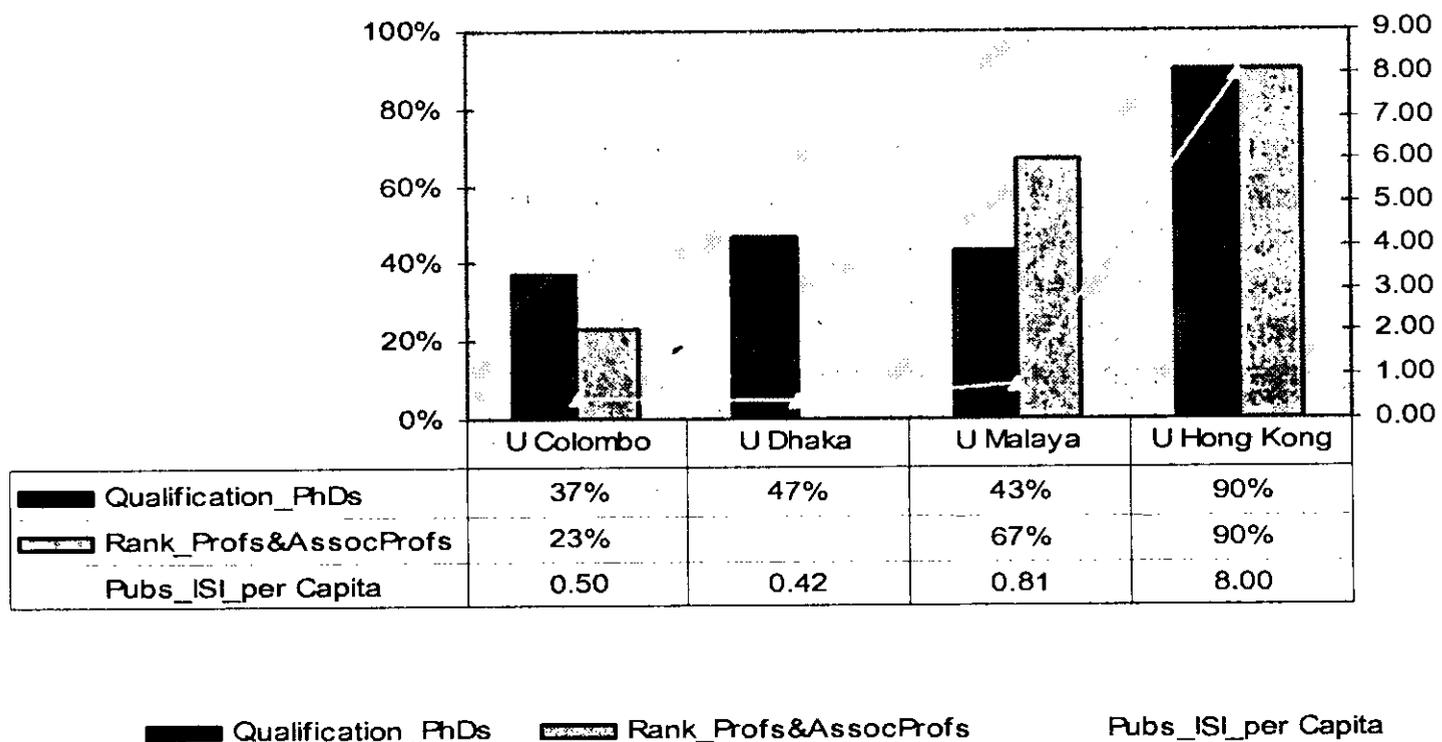


Figure 1. Quality of Faculty Comparisons for Universities of Colombo, Dhaka, Malaya and Hong Kong. Pubs_ISI-per_Capita is the average number of Institute of Scientific Information indexed journal articles for the most recent five years per faculty member.

We also set targets for “rank” indicators at “20% of the faculty body holding rank of professor” and “30% holding the rank of associate professor”, for a total of 50% of ranked faculty, based on data for benchmark institutions (Figure 1: University of Dhaka, not available; University of Malaya, 67%).

Current percent of ranked faculty in H&SS in Sri Lanka is dismally low with a total of only 16% (associate professors, %; professors, 9%). Given that the percent of faculty with PhDs may barely reach 50% in three years, a target of 50% ranked faculty may take some time to reach.

In terms of publications, we used ISI publications for faculty from all academic streams in the four benchmark institutions as a proxy indicator of the general productivity of faculty in those institutions. The publication rate of University of Dhaka at 0.43 publications per faculty per five year period was lower than that of University of Colombo but the rate for University of Malaya was 0.80. University of Hong Kong outperformed all with 8.0 publications per capita. Although we were not able to determine what percent of faculty had ISI publications, we determined that the publication rate of Sri Lankan universities in ISI and non-ISI venues should be roughly double the current levels to reach reasonable regional standards, by using the publications per capita data for University of Malaya.

From the H&SS survey we were able to determine both the publications per faculty member and the percent of faculty members with publications. For example, the survey showed that that H&SS faculty in Sri Lanka published 0.23 international publications and 0.70 national publications per faculty member. The survey also showed that 12% and 23% of faculty, respectively, had one or more international and national publications, respectively. Using the latter set of numbers and approximately doubling those, we set a target of “having at least 25% of the faculty with at least one international publication during the most recent five years” and “50% with at least one national publication”.

The details of the above derivations are given elsewhere. (Gamage,2000)

In Figure 2, we present in a **scorecard format** the current performance of H&SS faculty in Sri Lanka, against the performance targets we derived. There are gaps in all areas. The most critical gap is perhaps the gap of 18% in PhD degree holders, since rank or the publications record of faculty would be determined very much by the percent of faculty with PhD degrees. Therefore, UGC might pay attention to the need for 18% more foreign PhDs. This can be achieved by getting the 23% of faculty without PhD or masters to obtain their post-graduate qualifications as soon as possible and having some of them continue on to PhDs, and encouraging some

of the masters degree holders to initiate PhD training. As for the 2% gap in local PhDs, current UGC initiatives should address that.

In terms of publications, the gap of 24% in national publications should be addressed while giving incentives for those with national publications to get at least one international publication, so that the gap of 14% in international publications can be addressed.

The gap in ranked professors is the largest of all the gaps and may require some out-of-the-box thinking. Giving more recognition to the quality of teaching in the evaluation of associate professorships or professorships would be a strategy worth discussing.

Currently, quality of teaching is not assessed in promotions to associate professor or professor positions.(circular 869) On the other hand, it is technically possible for an individual to receive an associate professorship or a professorship on local peer-review alone, since there is no stipulation in current promotion criteria that a faculty member must have some level of international credibility, by way of internationally peer-reviewed scholarly outputs, before he or she receives the rank of associate professor or professor. The result is low standards in both teaching and research.

Goals and Objectives	Performance Targets	Current Performance
QUALIFICATIONS		
• PhDs from foreign universities	40%	22%
• PhDs from local universities	10%	8%
• Masters degrees	50%	47%
• No PhD or Masters	0	23%
RANK		
• Professor	20%	9%
• Associate Professor	30%	7%
PUBLICATIONS		
• At least one national publication in the recent five years	50%	26%
• At least one international publication in the recent five years	25%	11%

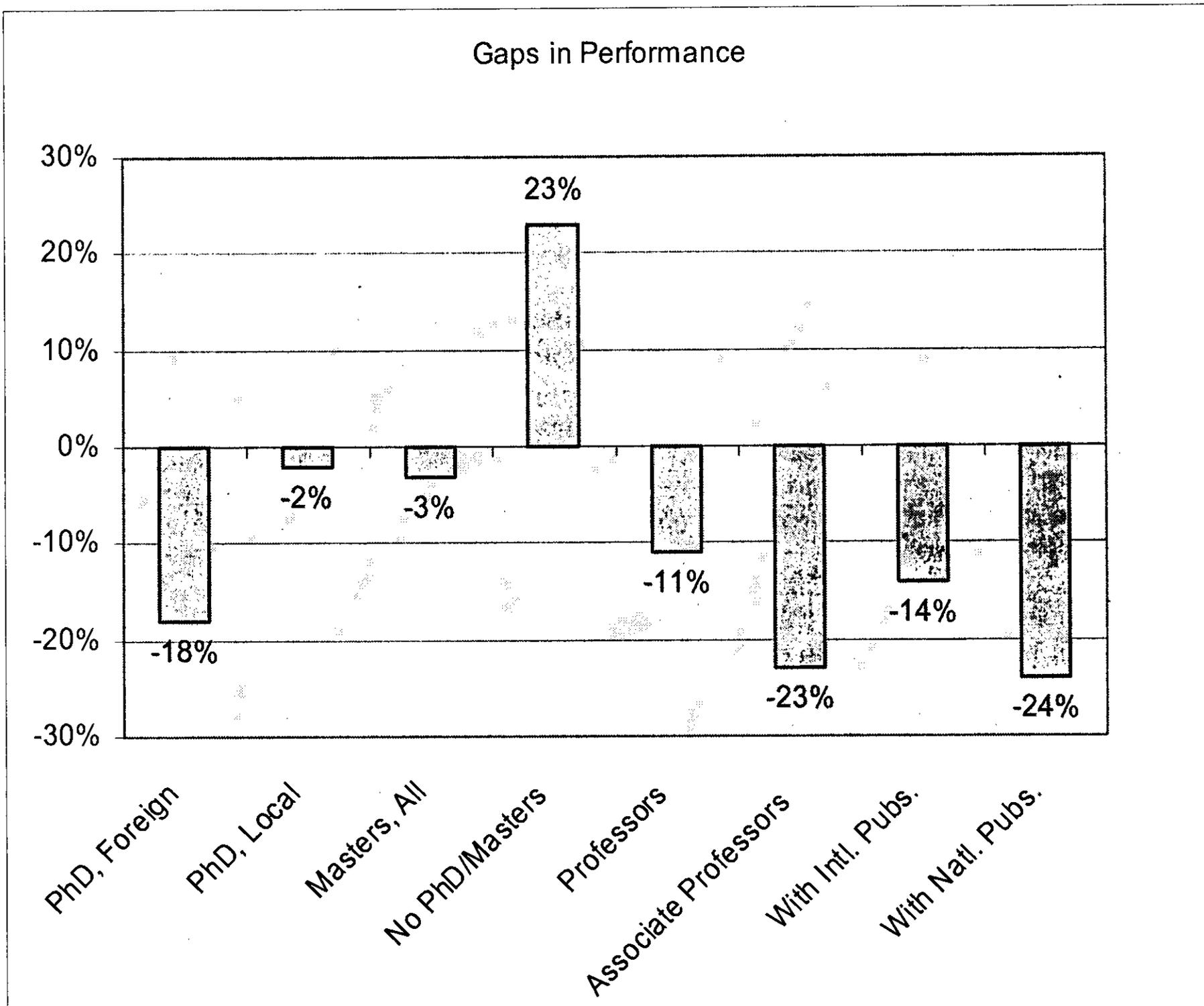


Figure 2. Faculty Quality Scorecard for Humanities and Social Sciences Disciplines in Sri Lanka, 2004/5; Performance targets are based on values for selected Asian and local universities. Current performance is based on the 2004/5 Survey of H&SS faculty.

We recommend a focus on quality of teaching with a stipulation that all teachers should show accomplishments in teaching for continuation or promotions. These stipulations should be accompanied by realistic performance targets for scholarly outputs to ensure that the faculty members are able to connect to global knowledge

networks and let their students learn from a “running stream” and not a “stagnant pool,” as Scott (1851) very vividly put.

Overall, we recommend that further efforts should be directed towards, (a) ensuring that the university system uses its capacity to produce local PhDs to its fullest (b) making it a priority to secure funds for training 180 or more PhDs in H&SS outside of the country, and (c) giving incentives for existing PhDs to publish more and work towards associate professorships and professorships.

Scorecards should always be presented as **balanced scorecards** where the quality of faculty, for example, can be viewed in the context of other quality indicators. Quality of a university education is determined by a combination of inputs, processes and outputs. Faculty accomplishments amount to nothing if the teachers are apathetic, libraries are stocked poorly, the internet is non-existent, or the universities shut down often due to unrest. Therefore it is critical that policymakers view faculty quality in context. Examples of balanced scorecards can be viewed at other university web sites.⁹

A **Ranking** can be used by students, parents, policymakers and other stakeholders of higher education to get a quick overview of the relative performance of academic programs or institutions. A ranking report is prepared by ordering the composite faculty quality score for each organizational unit in descending order. In this particular study, the composite faculty score is the sum of scores for post-graduate qualifications, rank and publications, for a given academic unit. Each component score is standardized to 10 by dividing by the corresponding score for the benchmark institution and multiplying by 10. The highest possible composite score is 30. A ranking of public universities in Sri Lanka in terms of the quality of H & SS faculty is given in Figure 7. A ranking of disciplines in H&SS in terms of the quality of their faculty is given in Figure 8.

According to our analysis, University of Colombo ranked highest with a score of 20 out of 30, followed by Universities of Peradeniya, Sri Jayewardenapura and Jaffna (Figure 7). Surprisingly, Rajarata University ranked ahead of University of Ruhuna, a more established university. The scores are low across the board.

From among the disciplines in H&SS, English, history and Tamil ranked in the top 3, and fine arts, archaeology and linguistics ranked lowest. All disciplines except fine arts received 50% or more of the highest possible score of 10 for post-graduate qualifications but some disciplines performed poorly in international publications and

⁹ For example, www.osu.edu/academicplan/2005executive.php; <http://www.planning.ed.ac.uk/BSC/0405BSC.htm>.

rank. For example, the Sinhala department performed poorly in international publications¹⁰ although that department scored relatively well on qualifications and rank. Fine arts probably should be judged on different criteria from others. Overall, the intent of this study is not to make definitive assessment on faculty quality but to create and awareness of and initiate a dialogue on quality of faculty.

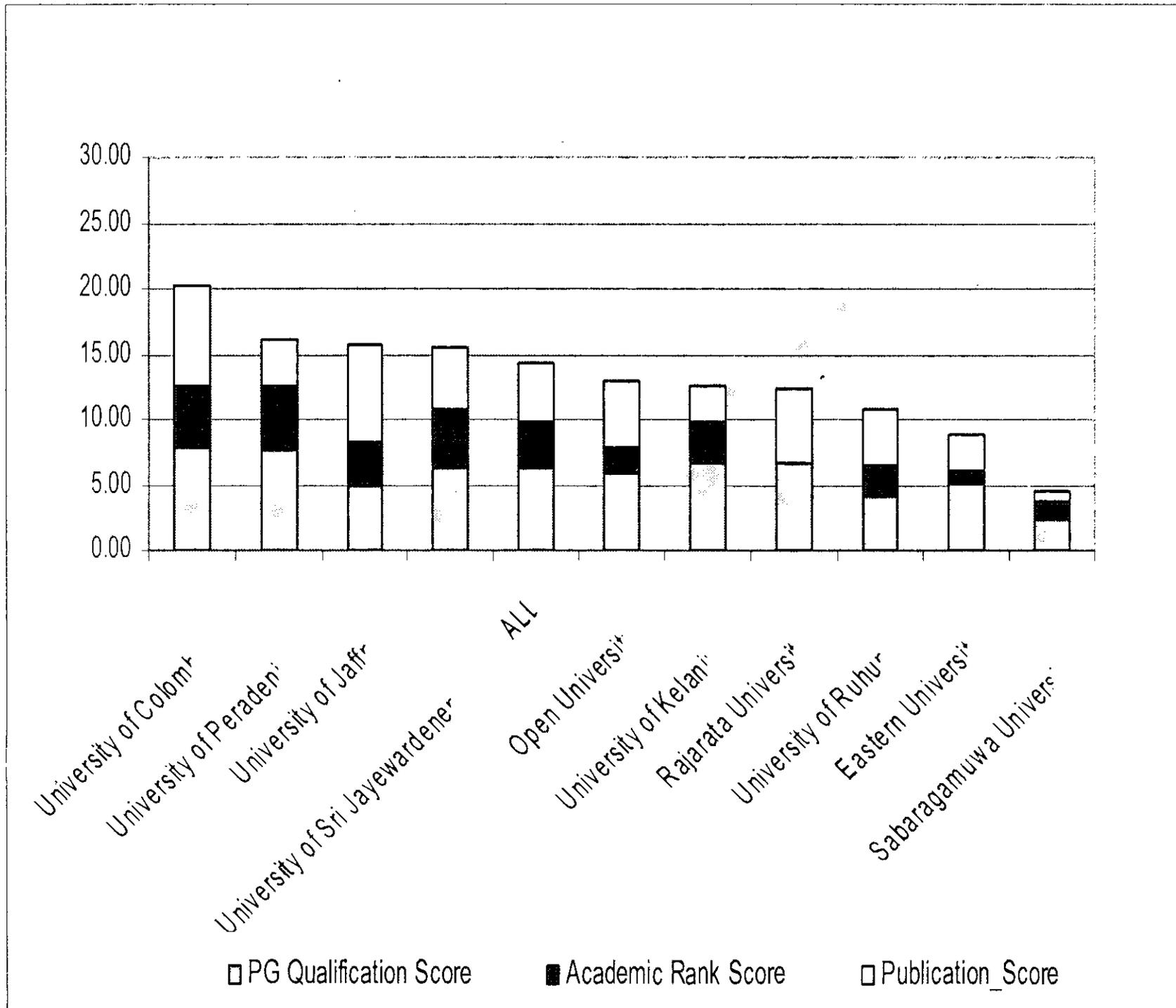


Figure 7. Ranking of H&SS Faculty by University; Maximum possible score is 30.0.

¹⁰ Scholarly works, if of value, would not bound by geography.

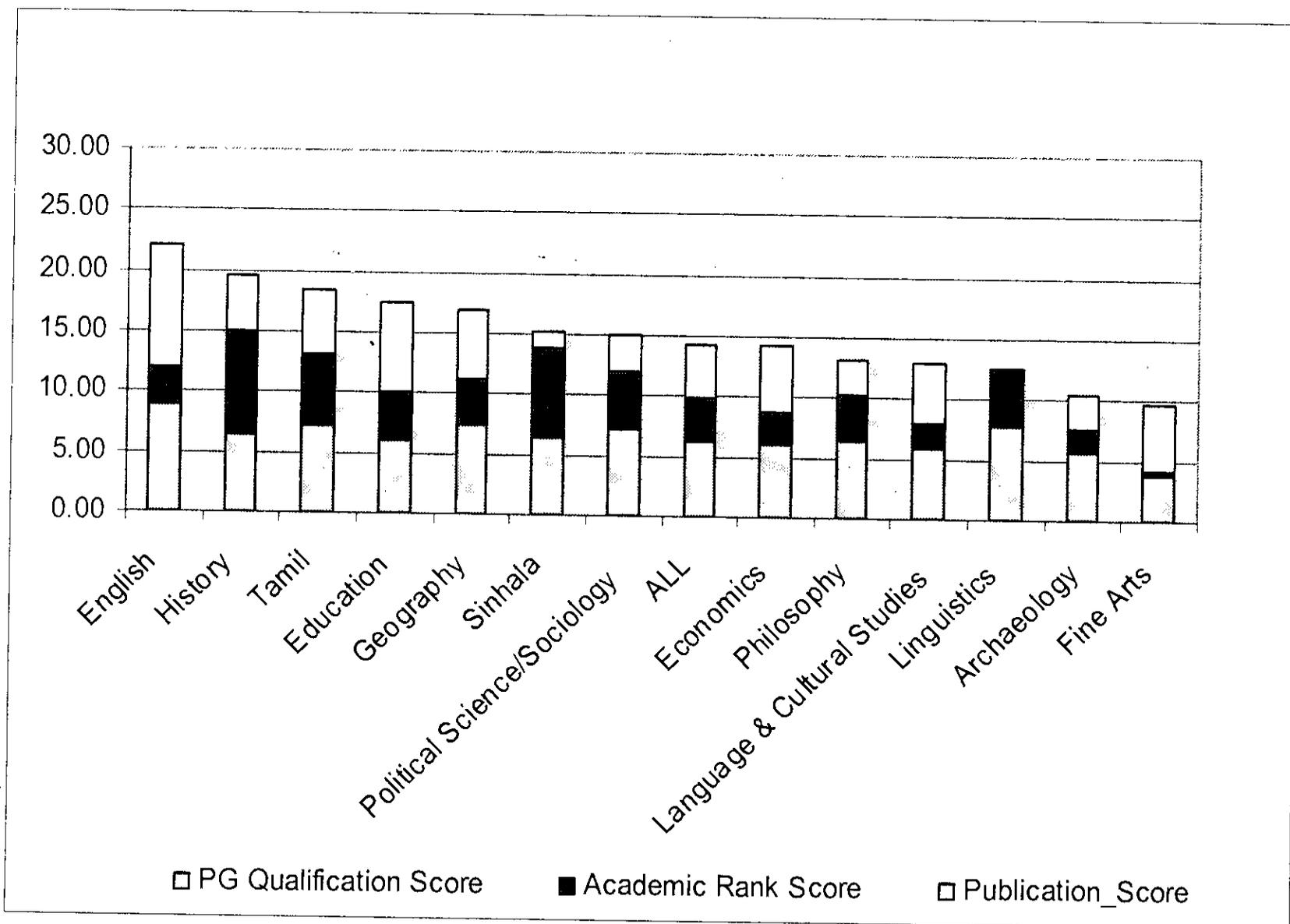


Figure 8. Ranking of H&SS Faculty by Discipline; Maximum possible score is 30.0.

REFERENCES

Circular 869, www.ugc.ac.lk/virtuallibrary

Gamage, Sujata (2006), Quality through Connectivity: Strategies for Universities in Developing Countries, to be published. Also available at www.globalconnectivity.lk or www.educationforum.lk.

Newby, Sir Howard (1999), in 'The relationship between teaching, research and the other outputs of higher education institutions', <http://www.hefce.ac.uk/research/review/>, accessed January 2006.

Scott, A. J., the first principal of Owens College, Manchester, 1851