

BOLGODA CHAT

Taking Opportunities: Turning the Moments into Milestones

An interview with
Prof. Malik Ranasinghe

Through this Bolgoda Chat, we meet Professor KAMK (Malik) Ranasinghe, another celebrated former Vice Chancellor of the University of Moratuwa. During his tenure as Dean and as Vice Chancellor, Professor Ranasinghe introduced the semester system to the Faculty of Engineering (FoE), started the process to relocate the NDT program from the Katubedda premises to the Diyagama, encouraged students to participate at international competitions like Google Summer of Code, motivated research among academics, and forged strong and close relationship with industry. Professor Ranasinghe is often cited as the creator of the University of Moratuwa brand. Here is his story, from his own words.

I was born in Yogiyana in the Puttalam District and started my schooling at the Wekada Maha Vidyalaya in Yogiyana. Subsequently I was transferred to Trinity College, Kandy. As a boarder at Trinity, I participated in sports, society activities as well as studies. I was the captain of Trinity College hockey, basketball, and table tennis teams, as well as the President of Trinity College Buddhist Students' Society. A highlight of my time at school was organising a pirith ceremony and almsgiving within the premises of Trinity College for the first time. This annual event has continued without break for the last 49 years.

Upon passing the GCE A/L, I chose University of Moratuwa for my higher education, as I had had enough of Kandy, and I wanted to be closer to my village. I graduated in 1984, majoring in Civil Engineering. At the university, I continued with the extracurricular activities as I did at school. I captained UoM's table tennis and hockey teams, was secretary and president of the UoM's Sports Council, and the student vice president of the UoM's Buddhist Association. I was awarded the Prof. D.S. Wijeyasekara award for the all-round student for 1983.

Upon graduation, I joined the academic staff in 1984, and in 1985 secured an open Canadian Commonwealth scholarship for my PhD studies at University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. My research area was in risk analysis of large engineering projects under the supervision of Prof. Alan D Russell. I really enjoyed my PhD research work, where we developed a robust mathematical framework for risk analysis and published several research papers in highly regarded international journals. That was the time I learnt the art of writing papers from research. I returned to UoM in October. Academics doing research was not the norm at UoM then. However, Dr. Priyan Dias (later Professor) did research, and I followed his example.

First Opportunity – Sports Administrator

Soon after I returned from Canada, then Vice Chancellor Prof. GTF De Silva invited me in 1992, to become the Chairman of the Sports Advisory Board. With that appointment, I was elected as the President of the SL University Sports Association (SLUSA), the governing body for sports at the Universities, and the Chair of the organizing committee of the Sri Lanka University Games 1995 to be held at the UoM.

Three key features of that stood out during the organization were to obtain sponsorships from the industry, involve as many of the Academics at UoM to conduct the games, and the Student Unions in the organization to ensure student politics did not hamper the University games.



Prof. M. Ranasinghe

Second Opportunity – Environmental Economist

Around 1993, USAID project called NAREPP project was introduced to popularize environmental economics in Sri Lanka. Mostly, academics from Agriculture faculties were invited for this program, and I was the only engineering academic invited. The reason being that I was identified as an engineering economist. Academics focusing on the agricultural area tend to look at natural (green side) valuation, for example valuing land and animals. I was to be trained to value the brown side that focuses on the built environment. I used the Kukule Ganga

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hydropower project (KGHP) feasibility study report borrowed from the CEB, for my case study for our seven-week training at Harvard University. Hydropower projects were usually considered damaging. Through my analysis, I demonstrated that KGHP had more long-term environmental benefits due to the cleanness of power generation compared to alternative options like coal and diesel. A new line of research and consultancy opportunities opened up for me to combine construction and environmental economics with project management.

My first consultancy task was as the environmental economist for the EIA of the Upper Kotmale Hydropower project.

Third Opportunity—Academic Administrator

Head of Civil Engineering, 2000–2001

My first opportunity for academic administration came in 2000, when Prof Priyan Dias declined to the Headship of Civil Engineering. Since I was the next in line I accepted the opportunity. As I was relatively young, I had to learn quickly to find a delicate balance in managing my peers as well as my teachers.

Dean of Engineering, 2001–2004

Deanship of the FoE became vacant in 2001 with the appointment of Prof. Lakshman Ratnayake to the UGC. Prof. Rohan Lucas, the natural successor, declined the offer to succeed, and I was unanimously elected as the Dean Engineering. Once again, I took the opportunity.

Immediately, UGC requested the two Faculties of Engineering to increase the annual student intakes. The Dean at the University of Peradeniya (UoP), asked for resources in advance to increase. I asked for a firm commitment from the UGC to prioritize funding for the buildings and facilities that were on the pipeline. As UGC agreed to my requests, FoE was committed to increase the annual intake from 275 to 450 students within three years. FoE received new buildings for Mechanical and Chemical Engineering Departments as well as the classroom theater from this agreement.

Increasing the intake was a difficult decision at that point. FoE was in the process of clearing the 88-89 backlog by working four terms a year. Yet, I saw advantages of an increased intake. The FoE students would outnumber the NDT students, which I believed would bring about a more peaceful atmosphere. It would open UoM engineering for more students. The result of the increase that was unexpected was the demand for admission to the UoM FoE rising significantly.

At the beginning of my term, UoP was marginally the preferred choice, 52% to 48%, among the top 10% on merit of the prospective engineering entrants to the two engineering faculties. By the end of my term as the Dean, the UoM's FoE was preferred by over 90% of the top 10% of the engineering entrants. Within the next seven years this number rose to 98%.

“With the increase of the size of intake, UoM became the 1st preference of engineering entrants in the country.”

The first batch of students under the semester system was admitted during my tenure. That was a challenging time. I believe I managed the transition process effectively as both the students, in the year end and semester systems, and the staff accepted the numerous strategies we implemented.

The IT Faculty was established during my tenure. By releasing staff and as well as the required resources, the FoE played a major role in ensuring the success of the IT Faculty.

I stepped down as Dean of the FoE in 2004, after one term.

Vice Chancellor, 2005–2011

My vision as the Vice Chancellor was to **“produce world class graduates at the UoM in an environment that provides a rewarding experience for its students and staff”**.

The following strategies (goals) were proposed as possible ways to achieve my vision.

- Qualifications valued internationally.
- Harmonious, stimulating and supportive environment in which to learn and teach.
- Producing graduates who are not just employable, but much sought by private and public sector employers alike.
- Thriving and sustainable research culture.
- Motivated and effective academics, administrators and non-academic staff
- Environment for enterprise and efficient financial management with accountability.
- Improvement of the image of the UoM, nationally and internationally.
- Assurance of a University for All.

My End of Term report approved by the University Council in October 2011, concluded that during the last six years (2005-2011), the image of UoM had improved significantly, as reflected in the latest global rankings, the perception of the employers and the Society. This was achieved by,

- producing high quality graduates at the UoM who were highly employable and marketable both locally and internationally,
- utilizing the innovative capabilities of our staff effectively to provide services in cost recovery activities, like postgraduate courses, research and development, consultancy, continuous professional development, and community service. Thereby fulfilling the UoM's obligations to the Government, Industry, and the Society; and
- involving the employers and alumni in the University's development activities.

These actions had gone a long way in producing "world class graduates" in technological fields in an environment that provided a rewarding experience for students and the staff, and thereby the UoM achieving its vision until 2011, of becoming a nationally relevant and internationally recognized University.

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in an environment that provides a rewarding experience for its students and staff."

At the end of the six-year term, the following four values were inculcated amongst the University community through the described strategies (goals).

- Academic Discipline – Staff and the students worked to an agreed schedule to meet the deadlines and fulfil the approved work norms for academic accountability.
- Quality Assurance – UoM reliably validated, in a transparent manner, the standards of its teaching inputs, learning outcomes, performance assessment, and extra-curricular activities, to assure its stakeholders and the Society of the quality of its graduates and services.
- Stakeholder Harmony through Participation – Regular meetings with different staff groups, student groups and trade unions inculcated in the primary stakeholders, the virtue of maintaining harmony at the UoM through participation and discussion. Recurring issues between the Engineering and the NDT students were solved through effectively implementing the planned relocation of the ITUM.
- Financial Efficiency through Accountability – Accountability for the two sources of funds, namely, Consolidated Fund and Generated Funds, ensured efficient financial management at the UoM, thereby earning the accolade from the Chairman of the Committee on Public Enterprises (COPE) and the Auditor General, as the best managed University, both administratively and financially, and as one of the best managed public enterprises in Sri Lanka.

Fourth Opportunity – Corporate Leader

When Lanka IOC began operations in Sri Lanka, I was invited to become an independent non-executive director. I accepted the offer. That marked the beginning of a long journey for me in the corporate sector as the Chairman, Sampath Bank PLC as well as independent non-executive Director at the Colombo Stock Exchange, Sampath Bank PLC, Access Engineering PLC, Resus Energy PLC, Pan Asia

Bank PLC, Teejay Lanka PLC, United Motors Lanka PLC, and Hemas Power PLC.

Fifth Opportunity - Online programs

pioneer

During my last sabbatical in 2021 March, I along with the Mrs. Vishaka Nanayakkara, Director, CODL, helped to launch the online education initiative at the UoM, which resulted in the free of charge open.uom.lk platform. The platform launched on 22 February 2022 is focused towards preparing school leavers to be employable Trainee Full Stack Developers (TFSDs). Today, two and half years after its launch, the open.uom.lk platform has over 280,000 participants registered on it, exponentially exceeding the modest expectations UoM had at its launch. In October 2022 open.uom.lk was awarded the prestigious 8th European eLearning Excellence Award for 2022, where I was recognised as one of its developers.

In June 2023, in memory of Prof. Dayantha S Wijeyasekara's contribution to distance and open education at the UoM, open.uom.lk platform launched free of charge courses on project management benchmarked at the Certified Associate in Project Management (CAPM) level of the Project Management Institute (PMI), USA. This initiative would facilitate the launch of a stackable online Conversion Master's degree program in Project Management at the University of Moratuwa.

"I believe the knowledge provided through online education should be free for everyone."

Still active in research

I retired from the university service in September 2023. I kept myself active in research until my retirement. Between 2021 and 2023, I supervised my last research project at the UoM to introduce fiber optic monitoring technology to the Sri Lankan construction industry. The project was initiated by Dr. Kasun Kariyawasam and carried out at the Civil Engineering Department of UoM in collaboration with

Cambridge and Oxford Universities, with funding from Access Engineering PLC.

On February 29th, 2024, research application titled "Innovative Pre-Straining Tools and BOFDA Technology Assessment" submitted from the fiber optic monitoring technology research project at the UoM was awarded the prestigious Collaborate to Innovate Award 2023 by the Engineer Magazine, UK, in the very competitive "Information, Data and Connectivity" category which had five shortlisted nominees.

The award-winning collaborating team consisted of Cambridge Centre for Smart Infrastructure and Construction (CSIC), University of Moratuwa, University of Oxford, Access Engineering PLC, Laing O'Rourke Centre - University of Cambridge, Fibris-Terre Systems GmbH, University of Qatar, Epsimon Ltd and WSP UK.

Last Word

My last advice to the young Academics and the students is always to accept the opportunities that come your way. Do your best when entrusted with responsibility. Then you can be assured of results and satisfaction that you can be proud of during your retirement.

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