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Reminiscences of the Science Library since 1965

When the Librarian requested me to write my memories of the Science Library of the University of Colombo, I was a bit reluctant whether I would be able to put together from my memory the bit and pieces of a moving library from 1965 to 2021. During this period, we never had a permanent library in one place and the Science Library was moving many times to different places depending on the circumstances. However, with the repeated reminders from Ms Sajeewanie Somaratna, the Senior Assistant Librarian of the Science Library, finally I managed to put down my memories not only of the Science Library but also the connected stories of my life in the Science Faculty.

My memory goes back to the year 1965 when I joined the University of Ceylon as an undergraduate in the Bioscience stream of the Faculty of Science. During this period Science Faculty was around the central quadrangle facing the grounds and there was a beautiful view of the faculty from Thurstan Road as well as from Reid Avenue. The faculty consisted of five departments at that time consisting of Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Botany and Zoology. Botany, Zoology and Chemistry departments were around the quadrangle and the Physics and Mathematics departments were facing the university grounds. The 100-year-old two-storey building accommodated Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry departments. Botany and Zoology departments were in separate buildings along the Thurstan Road. The chemistry department had a very beautiful chemistry lecture theatre on the upper floor where during lectures we used to sit at the numbers assigned to us according to the initials of our surname. This arrangement helped the lecturer to record the student attendance. My number was 11 and I sat at the second row which is on the left side. All the chemistry lectures from the first year to the final year were held in this magnificent lecture hall. The blackboard can be pushed up and down giving adequate space for the lecturer to write. Bioscience students (60) and Physical Science students (150) had Chemistry lectures together. Engineering students (150) had their lectures separately. Later years as a lecturer I enjoyed lecturing in this magnificent hall appreciating its design where you can see and recognize all the students seated up to about 225. Next to Chemistry was the Physics Lecture Theatre which is also designed in a manner suitable for a lecture hall. The Mathematics department has the iconic tower which is the symbol of the University of Colombo. The Science Faculty also had a beautiful huge tree at the front end of the quadrangle spreading its branches around providing shade which was the centre of activities up to the end of the 1970s. During our student days, this tree was known as the “Magul Tree” and the science students of that era have a lot of memories of this tree. It was a resting place for most of the students after a heavy load of lectures and practicals. The lecturers of the Science Faculty parked their cars under this tree. The main building of the Zoology department occupies this spot now.

In 1965 when I joined the university the Library was in the College House. Science Library (departmental libraries) was on the ground floor on the right-hand side as one enters the building. We used to borrow books and return them on time. However, I cannot remember spending too much time studying there. The bookshop and the canteen were on the right to the Science Library and we frequented those two places often, particularly the bookshop as Botany and Zoology practical needed many materials.

During the first few weeks as a fresher, we were a little bit nervous about being bullied by the seniors. However, it was found to be not so. I of course have a vivid recollection of us, my brother and myself being stopped by a group of students as we were walking along Thurstan Road to enter the faculty premises. My brother was selected to the Faculty of Engineering, while I joined the Science Faculty. Those days the Engineering Faculty students had to follow the first-year Science course, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry and pass the first-year General Science Qualifying exam (QSQ) to continue the Engineering Programme at Peradeniya. They stopped us and were inquiring from my brother about the girl who was accompanying him. They did not bother me and I look the other way and waited. However much my brother tried to impress upon them that I am his sister they did not want to accept. Finally, they checked our identity cards and said sorry and then let us go. That was the only incident I faced as a fresher.

We were 60 students in the Bioscience group. Very often a group of us about 15 had our lunch in the last row of the KG Hall and sometimes in the old Zoology lecture hall facing the quadrangle. After lunch, Maya Weerasinghe who had a beautiful voice used to sing popular songs. We used to enjoy her singing until 1 pm when we go for the scheduled lectures. Sometimes we used to go to the Botany Garden Lab area behind the old Chemistry building, now occupied by the five-storey chemistry building. We used to walk around and have some jam fruits to eat. The lunch interval was a wonderful time for all of us.



The first Chemistry Special Batch in the University of Ceylon, Colombo - 1969

We were the first batch of 10 Chemistry Special Degree students at Colombo after shifting the programme to Peradeniya. Four of us were recruited as probationary lecturers as there were only 3 academics in the department at that time. Visiting lecturers conducted most of our lectures.

On returning to Sri Lanka after the PhD programme in 1974, I was expected to hand over a copy of my thesis to the Librarian. I visited Ceylon National Pavilion and handed over a copy of my thesis to the Librarian Ms Violet de Souza and had a friendly chat with her.

With the completion of the construction of the five-storey Chemistry building in the early 1980s and due to inadequate space in the departmental libraries to cater to the increase in intake of students to the Universities, the importance of having a Central Library for the Science Faculty became a priority. At the early stages, the 4th and 5th floors of the new Chemistry building was not fully occupied and a decision had been taken to shift the



In 1984 the Science Library was established in the 4th and 5th floors of the New Chemistry building.

departmental libraries, Botany, Zoology, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics, to the new Chemistry building. In 1984, the Bioscience section, Botany and Zoology departmental libraries were shifted to the 4th floor and Physical Science section, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics libraries were shifted to the 5th floor of the building. Corridors of the two floors were used as reading space. Before the books were shifted there was a concern whether the building could stand

the weight of the books as the building was not constructed to carry such weight. The contractors, Thudawe Brothers were consulted and the advice given was to stack the books along with the columns or beams so that the weight of the books would be distributed without any danger. This was a much better arrangement as there was ample space for the students for their studies. Chemistry books and periodicals were on the 5th floor and all the important books essential for covering lecture material were available and the Chemistry students used the library regularly. The Library Attendant at that period was Mr Sirisena. He was a pleasant person with a smile on his face all the time and he helped the students to search for the books. As the person who arranged the books on the racks, he knew exactly where the books were. He had been a great asset to the students. The Science Library continued to be there until 1993. The only disadvantage of the Library was the lack of an elevator. Everybody had to climb 4 or 5 floors to get to the Library.

During 1992-93, Science Faculty received Rs. 300 M worth of equipment from a JICA Grant. Department of Chemistry also received a large number of instruments. Part of the fourth floor was reserved for the establishment of the new Biochemistry and Molecular Biology laboratory. The Physical Chemistry laboratory and the undergraduate and postgraduate research laboratories were to accommodate on the 5th floor. Most of the instruments were to be shifted to the 4th and 5th floors. This necessitated the shifting of the Science Library to a suitable place.

I happened to be the Head of the Department of Chemistry at that time. I remembered that there was a plan to establish the new four storied Science Library in the Physics block once they move to the new physics building.

Professor K.D. Arudpragasm was the Dean at that time and I discussed the necessity of shifting the Library to a suitable place, possibility of using the old Physics building was also discussed. He advised me to explore the space available with the other Heads of Departments. We visited the Physics block and found the area available is adequate. However, it needed renovation before the Library could be shifted. Professor Arudpragasm undertook the responsibility of renovating the area before the Library was transferred.

In 1993 the Library was shifted to the renovated physics block and then Vice Chancellor Professor G L Peiris declared open the Science Library at the new premises. One of the main advantages of shifting the Library is the easy access to the Library being on the ground floor. However, it is not as comfortable as the one which was in the Chemistry Department.

In early 2000 the Library was updated with all the modern textbooks and the Library assisted researchers by providing facilities to obtain the research papers required. Science Library introduced electronic databases such as Blackwells, Wiley Inter Science with full-text access facilities to journal articles. When the Department of Chemistry commenced the B.Sc. Special degree programme in Pharmacy in 2000, all the textbooks required for this new programme were procured and were available in the Library for the students to refer. The Pharmacopoeias essential for the study programme, British Pharmacopoeia (BP) and the United States Pharmacopoeia (USP) were also made available in the Library. I appreciate the facilities provided by the Science Library for the success of the pharmacy programme.

In 2005 a new Assistant Librarian, Ms Sajeewanie Somaratne was appointed who happen to be one of my students of the Science Faculty. As I knew her, when I visit the Library I usually have a friendly chat with her basically regarding the additional facilities that could be provided to the student community and how her role as in charge of the Science Library could contribute to this. The new Library building project was commenced in 2013 and I observed her enthusiasm and the leadership role she played in getting the project completed with many others in the faculty. Among them, Professor Dhammika Dissanayake from the Department of Chemistry played a major role in assisting her.

After I retire from the University of Colombo, I continue my services to date (December 2021) in the Department of Chemistry as a consultant (Project Director/Manager) to the Sri Lanka Pharmaceutical Laboratory established with the support of the Ministry of Industry and the Sri Lanka Pharmaceutical Manufacturer's Association, providing analytical services to the pharmaceutical industry. This laboratory helps to maintain the high standards of the B.Sc. Pharmacy programme and assists undergraduate and postgraduate research students in the department.

In 2021, coinciding with the 100th Anniversary of the Science Faculty, Science Library found a permanent home in the newly built seven-storey building with all the modern facilities required for teaching, learning and research. The naming of the library as the "Information and Learning Centre"(ILC) is keeping up with modern times. The future generations of students who pass through this centre have up to date facilities and digital technologies, which no other students had for the past 100 years. May this Centre be the cornerstone assisting the faculty to produce quality graduates and postgraduates in sciences of high intellectual and ethical standards to serve the nation.

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Information and Learning Centre