

My Memories of the Graduateship Programme

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As one of the students of the first batch of the Grad.I.Chem.C Program, it is indeed a privilege to write an article for the silver jubilee passing out batch, about the history of the first batch, the difficulties we faced as well as our successes.

When Prof JNO Fernando requested me to write an article for the souvenir, I was honoured. However, I could not make up my mind regarding where to start. Finally I thought of starting at the beginning.

I would like the readers to think about life 30 years ago. During these days if anyone was not able to enter university after the Advanced Level their only option was to study ICMA or enter Law Collage. I was one of the victims of the district basis quota system introduced by the then government. Therefore, all my hopes of entering a university disappeared. Coming from a middle class family, there was not much advice available regarding my options. However, my beloved parents and other relatives had great expectations for me. I was somewhat a role model in my family circle. This kind of pressure led me to perform against all the odds. While wondering what to do, one of my friends told me that there was a new course being advertised and we should join. So both of us applied and we were selected for the course. That was the beginning of my association with the Institute of Chemistry.

In those days we had lectures at Aquinas College, Borella. The composition of the batch was Advanced Level drop outs like me and others who were working in the field and wanting to study further. We always had uncertainty about the recognition of the course. Besides that, we were not certain about the practical component. When was it going to start? Where and how much is it going to cost? These were the hot topics amongst our discussions. The second barrier was explaining this course to an ordinary person in relation to a university degree.

It was not only these challenges; we had other issues such as paying the course fees with respect to the economic conditions prevailing at the time. (I am not saying it was too expensive). Although I liked chemistry as a subject, the beginning was very hard, especially Physical Chemistry. This is mainly because I studied A/L in the Biology stream.

We studied against all the odds with meager or no facilities. In those days computers weren't even heard of, there was no internet for research and no library facilities. The libraries that we had access to didn't have the books we needed. One of our batch mates, Mr Molligoda, who was a graduate from the University of Colombo, helped a few of us in Physical

Chemistry. At that time he was teaching at Dilasal College, Modara, and he used to teach us after school. Being a full time student I could get his help but others who were working could not make it. It was somewhat like Lord Buddha, going from one guru to another to understand the universal truth.

The only hope we had was the belief that success will come one day. I can very well remember Prof JNO Fernando telling us it is in your hands to perform well so the course would get recognition. Even though I fully agree with him, being guinea pigs, our challenge was to get the opportunity to perform well.

With all these uncertainties and difficulties we kept going whilst some students dropped out. Finally due to the great efforts of Prof JNO Fernando and a few others, practical classes were commenced at S. Thomas' College, Mount Lavinia and later even the lectures were shifted to these premises.

We formed great friendships amongst our batch and helped each other out. To prepare for Part I about five of us camped at Mr Anton Edema's house at Gamapaha and studied together. When it came to Part II we camped out at one of our vacant houses which was infected with bats; everyone used to call it studying at "Vavul Mahal". These were very memorable days, we enjoyed what we were doing and shared our hardships together. All we did was teach others what we knew with the only facility we had, a piece of hardboard which we used as a blackboard.

Finally a few of us made it through Part II but the practicals, which started late in our third year had to be completed when I joined the CISIR, (ITI) Natural Products section as a Technical Assistant under Dr Jansz in 1983. I must say that I was privileged to work under him and that was the beginning of my career in the field of Chemistry. At the time it was a temporary position to work on a project under a NARESA grant. Armed with a Part II qualification, a Part I practical and a Part II Practical completion pending by end of 1983, Dr Jansz encouraged me to register for M.Phil. Degree in a University so that I could complete the degree by research. This was one of my dreams and I was very elated with the idea. At that time there were a couple of University graduates on research grants working at the CISIR, who were registered for M.Phil. Degrees. So it was time for me to get the Grad.I.Chem.C. qualification recognised by a university to register for an postgraduate programme.

I decided to meet the then Head of the Department of Chemistry of the University of Colombo and discuss the procedure. The answer I got was "Why do you want to do Masters Degree, with the qualification you have, you can work as a chemist". I was highly disappointed. Finally with the encouragement of Prof Jansz and Prof JNO Fernando,

I went to see the late Dr Sudath Kumarasinghe, the then Head of the Department of Chemistry, University of Kelaniya. He encouraged me to apply for registration at the University of Kelaniya and finally my application was accepted to register for a M.Phil degree.

I completed my M.Phil. by the end of 1986 under the supervision of Prof Jansz and Dr L K G Wickramasinghe. During this short period of time (from January 1983 to September 1986) I am happy to say that under Dr Jansz's direction I managed to obtain three international research papers in J.Sci.Food Agric. and about 9 communications at the Institute of Chemistry sessions. I was also fortunate enough to win the "Kandiah Memorial Award" (1986) awarded by the Institute of Chemistry, for the best research work carried out by a post graduate research student working in an institution other than a university. Since my grant was to end in 1986 it was time for me to look outside the CISIR.

I decided to apply for a few jobs that were advertised. The first one was a Chemist position at the Water Board. This was another chapter in my career, I was called for an interview and off I went to face the first interview that I had ever undergone. There were about 15 people waiting outside who had come for the same interview. I did not know any of them and I was the only one wearing a tie, a bit odd in the situation, yet I waited for my turn. Finally I was called in and the interview panel started looking at my resume and the leader of the interview board looked at me and asked me "You do not have a degree why did you come for the interview?" I simply said I have an equivalent and I was called for the interview and hence this was the reason for coming. He was very angry and in front of me directed someone to make an inquiry as to why I was called for an interview. So that was a "short and sweet" interview and enough to explain the situation at the time.

Then I went for an interview with "Mackwoods Winthrop", later absorbed into Glaxo. The position was a Chemist and even though I haven't had a Pharmaceutical Chemistry background I was selected for the position. They never contested my qualifications. This was the second turning point in my career. I managed to contribute positively in many ways and within a year I was promoted to Assistant QA Manager and then to QA Manager within two years after joining. I made many changes and helped improve the manufacturing processes, brought new equipment and implemented the local testing of certain products and handled many projects. It was hard work with a lot of great challenges. Here I should compliment former General Managers Mr. Willie Weersekera and Mr. Kosala Dissanayaka for the free hand given to me during my time there. At the age of 32 years I was holding one of the senior executive positions in the company.

However, due to the unsettled nature of the country at the time, as well as my desire for higher studies, I migrated to Australia in 1992 against the advice of all my superiors. So my life had a fresh start

in a new country, where I had to face many challenges not only in the field of Chemistry, but also with the challenges of settling into a new and foreign country. I was fortunate enough to join Sterling Winthrop, Australia, our sister company. I managed to get the job I was dreaming of and that was to join the R&D Department. The most interesting thing was that no one even bothered to question my qualifications and I was offered the job of Analytical Development Scientist. Straight after joining I faced the technical challenge where I had to familiarize myself with automated HPLC's and other instruments which I had never seen before in my life. The technological gap was so wide; however, within a few months I was up to speed and on my feet again.

Since then I have contributed a lot to the present pipeline of products in the Australian and worldwide market. My biggest contribution was developing sustain released paracetamol tablets for the worldwide market. Presently the product has been launched in more than 20 industrialized countries under the brand name 'Panadol Extend'. It took 5 years to develop, and my role was developing analytical methods, automation of analysis and product development. Besides these, I was involved in state of the art factories, solving technical and production issues of mass scale production. At times each trial batch may have cost a few million rupees and to get it right the first time was not an easy task.

Gradually I have moved away from the field of analytical chemistry and now I have moved to formulating products for the sophisticated consumer market not only for Australia but for the Asia Pacific region. As I moved on, all this expertise was achieved purely by hard work and dedication. It was never smooth sailing and a lot of challenges and risks had to be taken. I would say the foundation for my long journey to work along with best Pharmaceutical formulators in the region and the world was laid by the Graduateship Course of the Institute of Chemistry. If not I would not have seen the future in the field of science after being denied university entrance by default.

If Sri Lanka was to develop a strong pharmaceutical industry it needs a well defined government, policy frame work, a good pool of Analytical Method Development Chemists, Analytical Chemists, Expert Product Formulators, Process Engineers, Process and Cleaning Validation Chemists to support the industry. For that the country will need talented young budding Chemists like you. I am glad that the Institute of Chemistry realised the need thirty year ago and acted on it to become the largest provider of Graduate Chemists over the past decade.

In conclusion I would like to say to all the new, present and future students; life is not a bed of roses, dedication and faith in what you do will allow you to pursue and successfully achieve your individual goals.

I take this opportunity to thank everyone whose invaluable contributions helped bring the I.Chem.C Graduateship program to the level it is today.