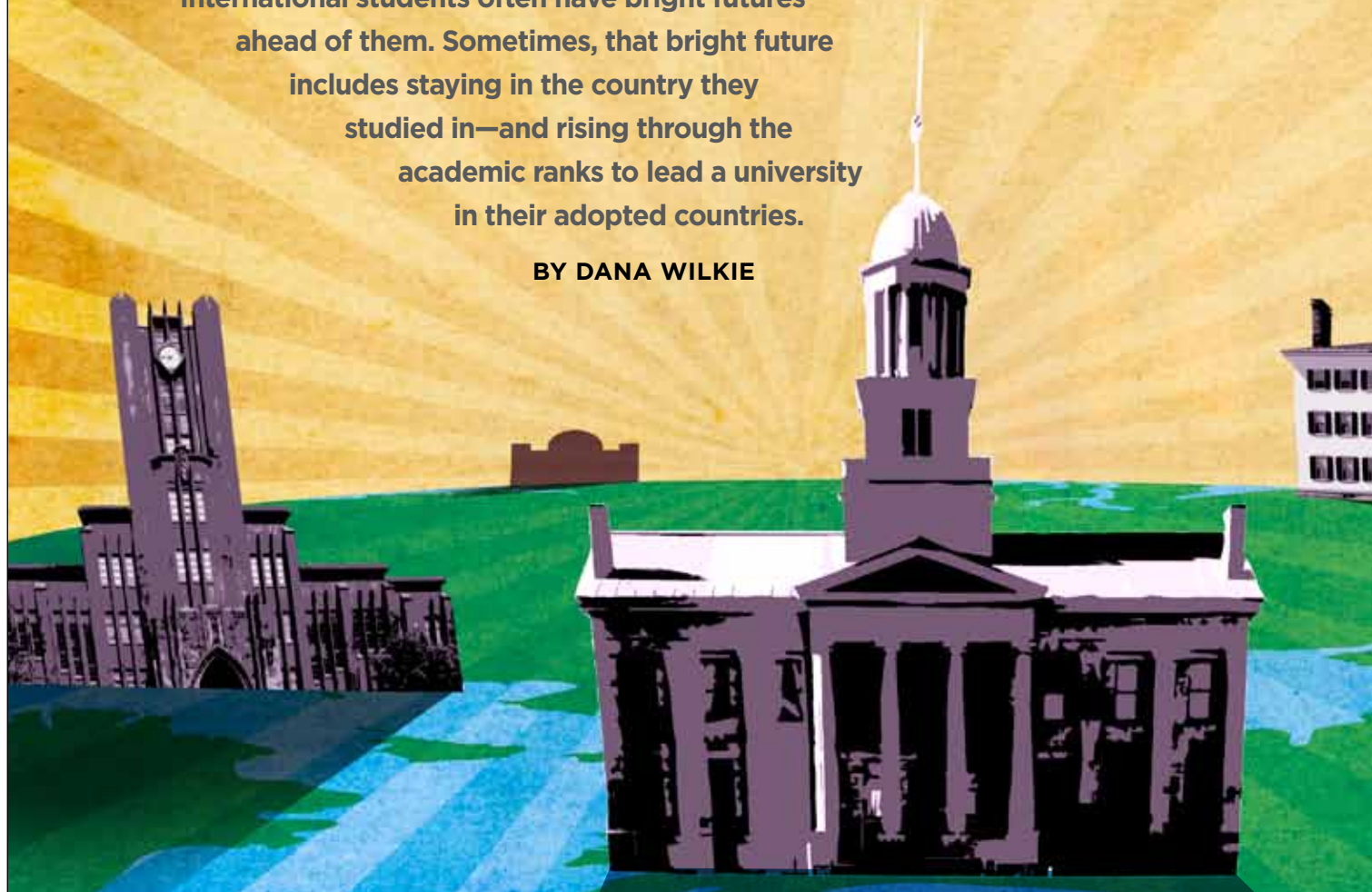


LANDS of PROMISE

International students often have bright futures ahead of them. Sometimes, that bright future includes staying in the country they studied in—and rising through the academic ranks to lead a university in their adopted countries.

BY DANA WILKIE



INDIRA SAMARASEKERA was the Fulbright scholar lured to Canada by her father's admiration for the nation. Monte Cassim was the Sri Lanka native who jokes that he wound up in Japan because his mother "kicked me out of the house." It was marriage that brought Ingrid Moses from her native Germany to Australia. And Jem Spectar put down roots in America because he pursued the dream embraced by every one of his peers in Cameroon, Africa—to study in the United States.

What do these four men and women have in common?

All are, or have been, presidents of colleges or universities in countries where they were not born or raised, but where they came to pursue undergraduate or graduate work. Sometimes, it was an expired visa that pushed them into a country that would eventually become "home." Other times, it was following a spouse, an instinct, or a

mentor's suggestion that placed them in a foreign nation where they would eventually reach what was arguably the pinnacle of their academic careers.

Whatever the different forces that brought them to a foreign land and convinced them to stay, all four agree on one thing: They simply fell in love with their adopted countries.

"It's this mass of humanity," says the Sri Lankan-born Cassim of Japan, where he led the Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University until last January and has lived nearly 30 years. "You can't contain it or put it in order. It's diverse and messy. But it's alive, and you get energy from this."

From an academic standpoint, one has to ask if there is any perspective, experience, or talent that these men and women brought to their leadership of foreign schools that a homegrown president might not have.

All four say—absolutely.



ILLUSTRATION: BONOTOM STUDIO USING ELEMENTS FROM SHUTTERSTOCK AND ISTOCKPHOTO

Indira Samarasekera

From Sri Lanka to Canada

GROWING UP IN SRI LANKA with a surname that identified her as a minority under the country's ruling class, Indira Samarasekera knew early on that her education would be limited if she remained in her home country. So after graduating from the University of Sri Lanka in 1974, she won a Fulbright-Hays scholarship to the United States, where she earned her master's in mechanical engineering at the University of California at Davis.

Samarasekera (pronounced SAM-er-ah-SAKE-ah-rah) might have remained in the United States to pursue her doctoral studies, but something her father had told her growing up kept resonating in her mind.

"My father had always said to me that Canada was a great country to live in because it had people of different cultures who were welcome, it had a lot of open spaces, and he perceived it to be a land of opportunity."

Opportunity is what Samarasekera was seeking as she pursued her studies in engineering—a field that at the time was not wide open to women. And because her husband's student visa would not allow him to remain in the United States, the couple moved to Canada. There, Samarasekera began pursuing a PhD in metallurgical engineering from the University of British Columbia.

It was a tough time to be a woman in the engineering world. Samarasekera was one of only two female students in the university's engineering PhD program, and she had no academic role models. She was thinking about abandoning her PhD program when she teamed up with a Canadian supervisor who shared her curiosity about using computers to create mathematical models for complex materials engineering processes. At the time, computers were just becoming a powerful tool in the engineering field.

"You could explore the frontiers of the subject but also use a tool just emerging as a mainstream opportunity," said Samarasekera, who discovered how to prevent defects when liquid steel was converted to solid form. "This knowledge was timely, because the industry had difficulties making crack-free steel. I was fortunate that my doctoral research linked closely with this industry need. It was a very exciting project—at the nexus of industry and the university—and I had the best of both worlds in a way."

She earned her doctorate in 1980 and one year later received the E.W.R. Steacie Memorial Fellow-



Indira Samarasekera

ship, which the Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada awards to the nation's top four researchers under age 40.

It was the beginning of a journey that would propel Samarasekera to Alberta University's top position in less than three decades. By choosing the right academic discipline at the right time, conducting timely research, and relying on talented mentors, Samarasekera quickly distinguished herself as one of Canada's leading metallurgical engineers.

The University of British Columbia hired her to teach, and she discovered that being one of only two female professors in the entire engineering department actually had its advantages.

It was the early 1980s—an era when the academic world was paying closer attention to diversity. As a result, Samarasekera found herself taking on responsibilities outside of the teaching realm that exposed her not only to new ideas in her profession, but also to a wide range of people. She was on hiring committees and academic appeals panels. She became president of the Metallurgy Engineering Society of Canada. In the meantime, she continued to consult for steel companies around the world.

"All of this prepared me to take on a leadership role," said Samarasekera, who by 2000 found herself the university's vice president of research, which was

an unusual leap for a woman with no background as a dean or department chair.

“It was a bit of a parachute to go to vice president in one fell swoop,” she admits. “I was very fortunate in that I had many people in the materials engineering field who were quite supportive of a female in engineering.”

Five years later—after Samarasekera helped to bolster the university’s research reputation globally and to significantly expand its research funding—the vice president’s phone started ringing with offers. Particularly aggressive was the University of Alberta. In 2006, Samarasekera signed on as the school’s twelfth president—not to mention the first female president of any Alberta university.

With her international background, Samarasekera recognized that the university needed to extend its research tentacles, both at the school and abroad, so she set about strengthening the school’s research reputation nationally and globally.

Under her watch, the school established the Killam Research Fund for the Social Sciences, Humanities, and Fine Arts; formed the Schools of Energy and the Environment and of Public Health; began building a \$400 million Centennial Centre for Interdisciplinary Science; and finished constructing a \$60 million National Institute for Nanotechnology and a \$300 million Health Research Innovation Facility.

Thirty-two years after first moving to Canada, after raising a son and daughter there and building her career, Samarasekera still feels strong connections to Sri Lanka. She makes yearly trips to her native Sri Lanka to attract undergraduate students. She sends her professors around the world to do the same—focusing in particular on China, Germany, Mexico, and the United States. During the past decade, 70 percent of the university’s faculty has come from outside Canada. The university is also creating international partnerships for research and student exchanges.

“Today’s students have to experience that they live in an enormously interconnected world, and they must experience people from other cultures very early on,” she says.

“One of the powerful benefits of international students is their ability to be a bridge between cultures and to contribute to more than one country.”

When she leaves the presidency, one of Samarasekera’s goals is to help the educational system of Sri Lanka, which is just now emerging from civil strife.

“One retains a certain loyalty to one’s home country,” she says. “You see this phenomenon happening now elsewhere: where diaspora are returning to their countries to make contributions.”



Monte Cassim

Monte Cassim

From Sri Lanka to Japan

CERTAINLY MONTE CASSIM UNDERSTANDS THIS. “I have learned to appreciate even more the continent I was born on,” says Cassim, who lives in Japan but frequently visits his native Sri Lanka to manage a charity that helps impoverished communities build power plants, water purification systems, and other improvements to help residents become self-reliant.

Ask Cassim about the career path that led him to take charge of Japan’s Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in 2004, and the word one most often hears is “reluctant.”

He was the reluctant immigrant. The reluctant undergraduate. The reluctant PhD candidate. The reluctant university hire. The reluctant president.

“I have not exercised any sort of will or initiative,” jokes Cassim. “I’ve just been directed by others. I owe a lot of people who’ve helped me on the way.”

One wonders if this is Cassim’s self-effacing way to deflect attention from what has in fact been a creative and disciplined career. Moreover, if Cassim indeed had to be “talked into” any of the steps it took to get him where he is, the outcome appears to have been pleasant enough, as Cassim frequently refers to how much “fun” each of his jobs has been.

Cassim was born in Sri Lanka, graduated from the Royal College of Colombo with a bachelor's in architecture and spent a few years working for the government and a private architect after his father died and left the family with only a meager pension. So it was puzzling—if not daunting—when his mother advised that he leave the jobs that were providing their only other income so he could see more of the world.

"In a sense, I was kicked out of the house," says Cassim, who left his homeland at age 24 on a Japanese government scholarship to the University of Tokyo's Graduate School of Engineering, where his master's and doctoral research involved traveling the country to understand the history of Japanese architecture. "Reluctantly, as a lazy student, I extended my studies from looking back 30 years to 100 years...and it ended up being 300 years of review."

Newly married, Cassim also needed work, which he found at the Japan Center for Area Development Research and as an urban and regional planning instructor in Malaysia. In 1980, with his PhD in hand, Cassim was on the brink of accepting a professorship back in Sri Lanka when his son's premature birth forced him to stay put and find a steady job, which he did in the design department of one of Japan's largest conglomerates: the Mitsui Group.

He traveled Asia extensively, worked on the side for a small planning and development consultancy, and was considering an offer at Nagawa's United Nations Center for Regional Development when, oddly enough, his daughter's premature birth forced him to refuse the job because his newborn would be in an incubator at least four months. The United Nations authorities said they would wait.

"So I had to take the job, and it turned out to be a wonderful 10 years," said Cassim, who held the UN post until 1994, working mostly in Asia, but also in Africa and Latin America.

When Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University opened a new department to explore public policy from the perspectives of science, engineering, and the humanities, Cassim returned to teaching. In 2004 the university named him president, a position he held six years before taking a post this past January as vice chancellor for international affairs with the school's governing body, the Ritsumeikan Trust.

Under his leadership, Asia Pacific University matured from a relatively little-known institution to one of stature. Its student population mushroomed from 3,200 to 6,200, from representing 62 nationalities to reflecting 98, and from hosting 46 companies each year to recruit graduates to nearly 400.

"Of course there were trials, but watching this creative energy of young people from all continents of the world was fantastic," says Cassim. "It just rejuvenates you being in that environment."

It is perhaps a testament to the roots he has laid in his adopted country that Cassim's daughter, now 25, will soon attend Tokyo University of the Arts on the same Japanese government scholarship that her father once studied under.



Ingrid Moses

Ingrid Moses

From Germany to Australia

INGRID MOSES CAME TO AUSTRALIA IN 1966—from Germany—after marrying an Australian native she met in college. How she eventually came to be president of Armidale's University of New England and chancellor at the University of Canberra—in a country where she was neither born nor raised—is the story of a career that became nearly meteoric once Moses discovered her love for academic research and educational development at the university level.

"I could not have had an academic career in Germany, where there is no career ladder as in the Anglophone countries," says Moses, who has been an Australian citizen for only 15 years and still has what natives consider an "accent" that identifies her as a relative newcomer. "To my knowledge I am the first

“My experience of being an international student—
at high school in the United States and as a postgraduate in Australia—
certainly convinced me of the value of international education.”

Ingrid Moses, chancellor of the University of Canberra

non-native-English-speaking president in Australia, and I was amazed myself that I was selected.”

That her opportunities were limited in Germany was apparent to Moses at an early age, so as a high school student she spent her senior year in Wyandotte, Michigan, through the Youth for Understanding student exchange program.

“It was a wonderful, eye-opening and life-changing experience, which also made me receptive to engagement with international students in Germany,” Moses recalls.

Back in Germany, she studied social sciences for her bachelor’s degree at the University of Erlangen-Nürnberg, where she also met John Anthony Moses, an Australian scholar conducting his master’s research. After they married, John earned his PhD and landed a position at the University of Queensland in Brisbane, his alma mater.

Moses followed six months later as an assisted migrant.

The next few years were busy ones for Moses. She had two sons in quick succession and stayed home to raise them while working as a part-time tutor and research assistant and eventually enrolling part-time in a master’s program at Queensland. It was when she became a graduate assistant in Queensland’s Tertiary Education Institute—the academic development unit of the university—that she found her niche.

“I loved doing research and the research fed into my work as an academic developer,” Moses recalls. “This was the beginning of a steep career.”

Steep indeed. Over the years, she would become widely known as a researcher in the field of higher education who was concerned with teaching quality. A one-year lectureship at Queensland turned into a permanent position, and Moses began research on her PhD, which she earned in 1986. She was immediately promoted to senior lecturer and was tenured. A year later, she became founding director of the Centre for Learning and Teaching at Sydney’s University of Technology. In 1993 she became pro vice chancellor of the University of Canberra, then deputy vice chancellor. In 1996 she became the first chair of the Australia Commonwealth’s new Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development. She became a member of the Australian Research Council’s Re-

search Training and Development Committee. Her research, consultancies, and publications have earned her national and international awards, as well as fellowships with the Australian College of Educators and the Australian Council for Educational Leaders. She is a life member of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc. And in 2003 the Australian government awarded her its “Centenary Medal” for her contributions to rural education.

“I had been on an upward trajectory with many national and international commitments,” says Moses, who credits several mentors for her success. Among them was her PhD supervisor, Ernest Roe, whom she calls a “collaborator and co-author” of her dissertation. Another was Brian Low, pro vice chancellor at Sydney’s University of Technology, who steered Moses toward several national and international events and organizations that were crucial for networking and visibility.

It was in 1997 that she came to the University of New England in New South Wales, where she remained first as vice chancellor, then president, for nearly nine years.

The university—located in a small country town with a tiny population—was nearly bankrupt when she arrived and the staff, she says, “utterly demoralized.” When she left in 2006 to become chancellor of the University of Canberra, the University of New England was on sound footing and morale was much improved.

Although Moses returns yearly to Germany to visit relatives (she also has professional ties to several German universities) she says her perspective on university leadership was largely formed by her Australian experiences.

“My experience of being an international student—at high school in the United States and as a postgraduate in Australia—certainly convinced me of the value of international education,” said Moses, who introduced the idea of awarding bonuses to university scholars who spend their sabbaticals at foreign partner universities, as well as bursaries for students who participate in foreign exchange programs. “My view of independent learning was heavily influenced by the German experience, but the comparative lack of student support in Germany also highlighted for me the need to ensure that all students whom we admitted had the support they needed to graduate.”

Jem Spectar

From Cameroon to the United States

ON THE SUMMER DAY THREE YEARS AGO when Jem Spectar took over as the fifth president of Pennsylvania's University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown, the campus witnessed no ordinary inauguration.

Congratulatory messages came from former President Bill Clinton, from Nobel Peace Prize winner Desmond Tutu, and from Liberian President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf. Blogs that follow the careers of native West Africans exploded with the news. University leaders lauded Spectar's worldwide work fighting poverty and AIDS.

As for the Cameroon-born Spectar, he spelled out his vision clearly. "We are duty-bound to guide our students as they prepare for the advent of global society," Spectar said in an acceptance speech that called for graduates who are better prepared to work in a U.S. society and economy that have become increasingly interdependent on other nations.

"Like most academics who become university leaders, I am a teacher and educator, first and foremost—and constantly striving to be a better one at that," Spectar says today as he nears the end of his third year as president. "The opportunity to lead a university is made more meaningful and more rewarding to the extent that I play a part in serving or helping those who teach the next generation of citizens, servant-leaders, and community pillars."

Spectar—the first Cameroonian to hold such a position at a major U.S. university—reflects on what it took to climb so far up the academic ladder in a nation that was not his homeland.

"I can certainly empathize with many of the hardships faced by our international students as they find themselves on a sojourn that tests mettle, motivation, and endurance," says Spectar.

As a boy in Cameroon, Spectar recalls that his parents put a high premium on a quality education.

"They had very high expectations and motivated me to work exceedingly hard," says Spectar. "From an early age, I was imbued with a restless quest for excellence and distinction as well as a determination to improve my lot. Studying in the United States was a dream shared by most of my high school peers looking for vistas of greater opportunity, promise, and possibility."

Spectar pursued that dream with a student visa to California's University of La Verne, where he focused on international studies and earned his bachelor's of



Jem Spectar

arts magna cum laude in 1989. He discovered he was passionate about acquiring and sharing knowledge, and a career in academia seemed the most natural fit. So, he pursued graduate studies with ferocious speed, earning a master's of business administration from Maryland's Frostburg State University in 1989, a master of arts from Washington, D.C.'s George Washington University in 1992, and his law degree from the University of Maryland that same year. In 1999 he earned a PhD in political science philosophy from California's Claremont Graduate University.

"I believe one should follow one's heart—in conjunction with one's head—to pursue a path that will contribute to the quest for greater meaning and above all to do something fulfilling that helps others flourish," Spectar says. "I believe all things are intricately and inextricably interwoven; all that came before contributes to the possibilities of the moment and beyond."

Although Spectar credits many teachers, mentors, and colleagues for his career, one in particular stands out: an African-born professor who came to the United States with the same dream Spectar had.

"He shared with me his own American journey, which clearly illustrated the vitality of America's promise," Spectar says. "This is, indeed, a land where education flattens the field, where hard work triumphs—notwithstanding station or status—and where one is mostly shackled by a dearth of imagination."

His first formal teaching job was back in La Verne, at his alma mater, as an assistant law professor, then associate professor. Jobs that followed included posts as provost at Western Oregon University, associate provost of academic affairs at the University of Scranton, director of studies at Princeton University, and assistant dean of students at the University of La Verne.

In June 2007 when he took the helm of the University of Pittsburgh, he vowed to expand the university's presence on the world stage. To date, he has put greater emphasis on recruiting international students, allowed more access to education abroad programs, and arranged international faculty exchanges to give students and teachers what he calls "an alternative learning perspective."

"The personal knowledge and experience of being an international student and participating in study abroad provides certain insights about the joys, rewards, as well as the frustrations of campus internationalization," Spectar says. "Given the pace and impact of globalization, it is crucial for institutions of higher learning to explore ways to adjust to a world that is becoming smaller, flatter, and more interconnected."

In fact, Spectar believes that the future's most successful universities will be those with robust student-scholar international exchange programs, as well as interdisciplinary and intercultural curricula that focus on "real-world" problems that are global in nature.

"The question is increasingly less about whether one should internationalize and more about how and to what extent," Spectar says. "The role of higher education in building, shaping, and even managing this messy new world is very much an issue. While there is much progress to be proud of, more work needs to be done."

The work that Spectar has done at the university so far includes: launching several new academic programs, including a nursing and health sciences discipline; investing in major capital projects that include a wellness center, a health sciences building, and renovated student housing; assembling a Global Education Task Force that outlined a framework for campus internationalization; and creating a campus office to lead international recruitment and administer an expanded education abroad program.

Since he took over, the campus has seen significant growth in international enrollment, as well as 31 percent



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Jem Spectar, president of University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

growth in the numbers of students studying abroad.

What advice would he give to international students who hope some day to lead their own universities in an adopted country?

"Some things that worked well for me included a robust spirit of adventure and a sense of curiosity," Spectar says. "I'd encourage international students to have a taste for the adventure of it all, to be willing to step beyond the borders that confine, and to embrace possibility. I hope they take some time, as I did, to explore this great, good, and beautiful country with

an open mind, to initiate friendship with Americans who, thankfully, are often eager to engage with people from other countries. Finally, I hope they remain undaunted during the inevitable doldrums that visitors and immigrants experience in the throes of a trying transition to a new world. Things do get much better with a sound education."

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DANA WILKIE is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C. Her last article for *IE* was "Developing K-12 Education" in the November/December 2009 issue.

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