

Independent accreditation body proposed to fix education sector glitches

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The Sri Lankan government should introduce an independent accreditation body to monitor and regulate both state and private sector higher education institutes, a leading figure of a state-run



economic policy think tank advocated this week.

Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Executive Director Dr. Saman Kelegama said given the problems regarding the quality of state universities, and the existence of private universities that offer both University Grants Commission approved and unapproved foreign degree programmes, an independent body should be put in charge.

“What do all these point to? We need an independent accreditation body that covers not only non-state institutions but also state sector institutions. This becomes all the more important as the government intends to open more private medical colleges in the future,” he said.

The existence of private higher education institutes, and especially the country’s only private medical school, is currently in the forefront of national dialogue, with state university students, lobby groups and also parties with various vested interests opposing such institutions.

Dr. Kelegama, who was delivering the J. E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture organized by the J. E. Jayasuriya Memorial Foundation, stressed that politics have drowned important technical issues by bringing class issues to the forefront of the debate. The Sri Lanka Medical Council (SLMC) and the Government Medical Officers’ Association (GMOA) have opposed to the continued operations of the private medical school, the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM).

They allege SAITM students lack of clinical exposure and have refused to grant them with SLMC registration to function as doctors. They maintain that SAITM students should also sit for the Act 16 conducted by the SLMC as in the case with students with foreign medical degrees to qualify to work as doctors in Sri Lanka.

However, Dr. Kelegama is of the opinion that super standards should not be applied just for medical degrees.

“Medical doctors should be of very high standards when it comes to dealing with patients. However,

this argument is equally valid for an engineer who designs a bridge or a building or an airline pilot who has more than one life in his or her hands at a given moment. Thus, so called super standards cannot be confined to just one profession,” he said.

Noting the recent court ruling which stated that the SLMC had employed double standards by interfering with the registration of SAITM graduates, Dr. Kelegama said that state universities should also be scrutinized.

“When it comes to standards of medical degrees, should the government faculties be treated differently from non-state faculties? Questions have been raised about the standards of teaching, laboratory facilities and training facilities in medical faculties of Rajarata and Batticaloa,” he said. However, he noted that neither SLMC nor GMOA have made comments on such issues.

According to him, many stakeholders influenced by current party politics and past welfare policies have failed to come to terms with the constitutional and fundamental right to education of every citizen in the country, as free education system hasn’t been able to provide freedom to education.

“There are benefits as well as costs of private sector participation in higher education. There are ample means by which the benefits could be maximized and costs could be minimized by a suitable statutory regulatory framework. Thus, a public sensitization programme highlighting the importance of non-state actors in higher education should be initiated by the government,” he said.

He added that if this is done, the remaining 83 percent of university qualified school-leavers who are marginalized annually due to lack of space in the country’s free education system could aspire for higher education with the help of the student loan programme introduced in the recent budget.

Further, he said that the country could limit the annual US\$ 50 million foreign exchange drain stemming from students seeking university education abroad, and even seek to earn foreign exchange by creating a low-cost education hub.

Dr. Kelegama added that letting state education institutes become more independent from state constraints in planning and financing could improve the quality of education as well.

He noted that it would be difficult to bridge the gap within the free education system, since it would require an entire overhaul of the budget.

Unfortunately, he noted that student protests against higher education institutions and the previous government’s ambivalence towards moving forward in quality assurance, equalization, qualification and framework for higher education, have discouraged almost 10 investors from entering Sri Lanka.