

Higher education hampered due to double standards

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Although different higher education institutions such as the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology and National Institute of Business Management have not being questioned by authorities on their degree-awarding status, the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM) has been questioned by the Sri Lanka Medical Council on their inadequacy of proving students with better medical training facilities.

This was stated by Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka delivering the 27th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture on the topic “Non -State Actors in Higher Education in Sri Lanka: Issues and Challenges” at the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute (SLFI) in Colombo recently.

He said SAITM established in 2009 was granted degree-awarding status by a government gazette notification that also stipulated the establishment of a teaching hospital to make it a fully fledged hospital. Following the establishment of a teaching hospital in 2013, degree awarding status was fully recognised by the Minister of Higher Education by issuing a gazette notification.

However the Sri Lanka Medical Council (SLMC) refused to recognise the degree courses offered by SAITM by stating that courses offered by them did not meet the required standard and clinical standards of the hospital was inadequate due to a limited number of patients, etc. The SLMC also argued that Forensic Medicine and Community Medicine courses were not fully covered in the SAITM syllabus. To overcome this lapse SAITM requested that they be allowed to follow these courses on a fee paying basis at government hospitals. However the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) objected to the granting of this facility to enable SAITM students to follow forensic and community medicine courses at government hospitals.

Dr. Kelegama asked whether a regulatory body like the SLMC can overrule a decision made by the Minister of Higher Education in recognising a degree by following a due process.

He also posed the questions whether there are double standards adopted by the SLMC when it comes to recognising the MBBS degree offered by the Kotalawela Defence Academy despite not having an affiliated hospital unlike SAITM.

Questions have also been raised about the laboratory facilities available at the Rajarata Medical faculty for its students.

Meanwhile institutes that offer professional diploma and certificate courses also provide a training for foreign professional qualifications especially in the field of accounting, marketing and IT. At the end of 2014, there were 8892 enrolments recorded in the degree awarding institutions and further 60,000 students were enrolled in diploma and affiliated degree programs of these institutions. In September 2013, a gazette extraordinary was tabled in Parliament to grant a 15 year tax holiday to a British University (Lancashire) that was planning to establish a branch campus in Sri Lanka. The then British Foreign Minister , William Haig laid the foundation to the campus when he visited Sri Lanka for the Commonwealth Summit in 2013 . Plans to allow 10 private universities to operate locally by 2020 in six such education zones were announced in 2014. However there was no positive outcome from any of

these initiatives owing to student agitation in the country where investors decided to take a wait and see approach, it was disclosed at the meeting.