

# **Non-State Actors in Higher Education in Sri Lanka: Issues and Challenges**

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## **1. Introduction**

I consider it as a singular honour to be asked to deliver the 27<sup>th</sup> J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture. I may be the first person among a gamut of distinguished academics, civil servants, and scholars who have delivered this lecture in the past 26 years, not to have known or met Prof. J.E. Jayasuriya. I belonged to a different generation and pursued a different discipline, however, I acquainted myself with the work of Prof. Jayasuriya from his writings and contributions he has made in the field of Education in Sri Lanka and the past J.E. Jayasuriya memorial lectures by eminent persons who knew Prof. Jayasuriya well.

Let me congratulate the J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Foundation for keeping the momentum of this lecture series going for the last 27 years. This is not an easy task, but the Foundation has stood up to the challenge. I hope, one day, the Foundation will compile all these lectures into a book, which I am sure will be an important source of reference for issues pertaining to Education Policy in Sri Lanka.

It is not my intention on this occasion to recollect the many achievements of Prof. Jayasuriya. His contribution as a teacher in Mathematics and Education, as an administrator of education, as a policy maker in education, as a policy advisor in international education, and as a researcher and author of several books have all been well documented in the existing literature.

From all the literature on Prof. Jayasuriya that I have gone through, it was very clear to me that Prof. Jayasuriya was an exemplary figure and a visionary. Let me quote Prof. T. Thanaraj on this: “Prof. Jayasuriya was a visionary; he had a personal vision as well as a vision for the education of his country. He was committed and dedicated and tirelessly made every effort to realize those visions. In his academic life he achieved greater heights and received international recognition for his contributions. He was a role model for his students and prepared them to continue his work and

many of his students keeping up the high ideals inculcated by their teacher and mentor still continue to provide dedicated service to their motherland as well as to humanity. Prof. Jayasuriya was a man ahead of his times and his thoughts and deeds will always inspire all of us and guide us to find creative solutions to our educational problems and issues” (*The Island*, 14 February 2014).

A similar comment was made by Dr. Gamani Corea when he delivered the 4<sup>th</sup> J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture in 1994. He said: “[Prof. Jayasuriya] emphasized the need for education not only for its own sake, although he believed in that profoundly, but also because of its enormous impact on society – economic, cultural and social. This makes Prof. Jayasuriya’s writing a lasting value. His was just not a comment on the situation in the period in which he wrote. It is a set of observations that are pertinent and relevant to our day and will surely remain so in the future” (p. 2).

To find creative solutions to one of the educational problems confronting this country as stated by Prof. Tanaraj, is going to be the theme of my talk today; i.e., Non-State Actors in Higher Education in Sri Lanka. What are the issues and challenges that we are facing today in the context of increasing participation of the private sector and NGOs in the higher education sector? I think this is a topic of contemporary relevance and I am sure had Prof. Jayasuriya been among the living today, it would have been a theme where he would have been working on and advising the government and how to meet the situation. Therefore I feel that I am paying a deserving tribute to this great scholar by selecting this theme that is closely associated with his interests.

I will divide my lecture as follows: In the next section (Section 2) I will outline the key problem that Sri Lanka’s higher education system is facing at present. I will then examine the emergence of non-state actors in the higher education system in Sri Lanka (Section 3) and in the fourth section highlight the emerging regulatory issues and the need for an accreditation institution. In the fifth section of the lecture, I will have a brief look at the role of non-state actors in the technical education and vocational training. I will then attempt to show what should be the way forward, followed by some concluding remarks at the end.

## **2. Capacity Constraints of the State Higher Education System – Need for a Parallel System with Private Sector Involvement**

Today, Sri Lanka faces a great challenge with limited higher educated human capital unable to meet the demands of the market. According to the population census 2012, only 4 per cent of the age 25 years and above population have degree level qualifications. This is mainly due to the higher education system catering only to a very small proportion of the population of the country.

As in the case of general education, the government plays a prominent role in the provision of higher education services, but the capacity of the state university system is limited. University intake has become progressively more competitive throughout the years due to the limited number of placements available. With the aim of increasing opportunities for higher education, the university intake which was confined to about 21,547 students in 2010 has now increased to about 25,200 in 2015 (see Table 1). Yet, of the 149,489 students who were eligible for university entrance from the A-Level 2014/2015, only 17 per cent were admitted to state universities due to limited placements in the state funded universities (CBSL, 2015). Consequently, each year, about 120,000 students who qualify for University admission have to abandon their ambitions to enter a university. Moreover, many students who pass out from International Schools with EDEXEL or International Baccalaureate or any other equivalent qualification are not able to find a place in local Universities.

What are the options available to all these students ? Those from highly affluent families are able to obtain university education outside the country. Annually, around 12,000 Sri Lankan students are estimated to go overseas for higher education opportunities.<sup>1</sup> The drain on foreign exchange is estimated at US\$ 50 million per annum. Those who cannot afford overseas education have been increasingly looking at the domestic market for alternative options.

To fill this gap, many non-state actors have come into the field of higher education. Various private sector degree-awarding institutions have sprung up across the

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<sup>1</sup> De Alwis. D., (2013), "More Foreign Students, Scholarships in Pursuit of Hub Status", <http://www.universityworldnews.com/article.php?story=20130524094742394>

country to cater to rising demand for higher education. One only needs to look at the Education supplementary pages in the Sunday newspapers, viz., The Sunday Times and Observer, on how these institutions are competing with one another to attract new students to their enrolment programmes. The expansion of higher education opportunities in Sri Lanka via non-state actors have enabled many students, some of whom would otherwise have studied abroad, to graduate locally at a considerably lower cost, and saving foreign exchange.

### **3. The Emergence of Non-State Actors in Higher Education in Sri Lanka**

With the opening up of the economy in 1977, there was a more liberal position taken in regard to higher education institutions. The landmark event was the establishment of the University Grants Commission (UGC) on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 1978 under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978. Among the functions of the UGC are allocation of funds to Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs), maintenance of academic standards, regulation of the administration of HEIs and regulation of admissions of students to HEIs. The government embarked on establishing first, a government-owned but more liberal Open University and thereafter a private medical college was permitted in 1981 (North Colombo Medical College -- Ragama), while foreign university affiliated institutions such as the Institute of Technological Studies were promoted since the mid-1980s. These initiatives could be considered as first acts of encouraging private sector involvement in higher education. Over the years, the private sector participation in the higher education sector grew, in particular, during the 1990s and 2000s.

As currently practised in Sri Lanka, private higher education institutes (HEIs) fall into two categories: (i) institutes registered under the Ministry of Higher Education as degree-awarding institutes, and (ii) Unregistered HEIs that operate outside the purview of the Ministry of Higher Education.

### *Registered Private HEIs as Degree-Awarding Institutes*

Granting ‘Degree Awarding’ status to institutions outside the purview of the UGC under the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 is a key milestone in Sri Lanka’s private higher education. Section 25A of the Act empowers the Minister, by way of a ‘Degree Awarding Institute Order’, to recognize any institution subject to fulfillment of stipulated conditions, as a ‘degree awarding institute’

As of 2015 there were 16 such non-state institutes offering 64 recognized degree programmes in the field of Information Technology, Engineering, Psychology, Management, and Medicine. These include NIBM (National Institute of Business Management), CINEC (Colombo International Nautical and Engineering College), Horizon Campus, SANSA Campus, SAIMM (South Asia Institute of Technology and Medicine), and the ICASL (Institute of Chartered Accountants of Sri Lanka). Many of these institutes are private organizations established under the Companies Act No. 07 of 2007 (or BOI Act No. 16 of 1992).

Institutes offering professional diploma and certificate courses in the field of Accounting, Marketing and Information Technology also operate with recognition from the Ministry of Higher Education. At the end of 2014, 8,892 total enrolments were recorded in these Degree Awarding Institutions for local degree awarding programmes. A further 60,000 plus students were enrolled in diploma and affiliated degree programmes in these institutes (CBSL, 2015).

In granting recognition to Degree Awarding Institutions, the Minister is subject to provisions of Section 70 C of the same Act to issue directions to these institutes in relation to the eligibility criteria in enrolling students and the examinations conducted by the institute. The institutional framework and rules in relation to the functions of the Specified Authority and the eligibility criteria for recognition is cited as the Specified Authority Rules No.1 of 2013, published in the Gazette Extraordinary No. 1824/21, dated August 22, 2013. These rules enable the Specified Authority to appoint Standing Committees on Accreditation and Quality Assurance (SCAQA), an Institutional Review Panel, and a Subject Review Panel. The rules also provide for the application process which an institute has to follow -- they offer guidelines to be followed in making an application for recognition.

The application should include a description of the financial viability of the institution, the availability of physical and human resources, capacity to conduct academic programmes meeting the SCAQA standards, research competencies, admission criteria<sup>2</sup>, and student support services. The Standing Committees assist the Specified Authority by assessing and performing the task of accreditation of institutes intending to be recognized as degree awarding institute. Finally, the Ministry of Higher Education on the basis of the recommendation approves the degree awarding status to these institutions. All the institutions I mentioned went through this procedure to gain the degree awarding status. At present, this procedure is not compulsory or mandatory for all HEIs.

### *Unregistered Private HEIs*

Many institutions of the private sector have not applied for such registration/certification. They have avoided the process of paying fees and going through the process of getting approval as they make use of an affiliation to a foreign University to assert their presence in the market. A foreign University affiliated institution does not face legal barriers in offering degrees under the current regulatory environment. Affiliated institutes generally train and prepare students for degree programmes and courses offered by the parent university -- a foreign university. Some of them are franchised institutions operating on behalf of a foreign degree awarding institution.<sup>3</sup> Several such affiliated institutes currently operate across Sri Lanka.

The UGC in terms of the provisions of the Public Administration Circular No. 16/92 dated 13<sup>th</sup> March 1992 recognizes universities listed in the International Handbook of Universities (published by International Association of Universities) and Commonwealth Universities Yearbook (published by Association of Commonwealth Universities) but not the degree programmes offered by recognized other foreign universities. Courses offered at these institutes are predominantly in Commerce and Management fields. These non-registered higher education institutes

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<sup>2</sup> The admission criteria and procedure followed by the institute under consideration should conform to the minimum entry qualifications adopted by the UGC for undergraduate programmes.

had around 4,518 students enrolled in their degree programmes in 2015 (CBSL, 2015).

With the growing number of affiliated institutes, the lack of policy on quality and a governing authority are issues that have been raised by many stakeholders in the society. There is no legal entity or regulatory body to monitor the functions of these institutes. The proposals presented in the 'National Policy Framework on Higher Education and Technical & Vocational Education' of 2009 recommends these institutions to register under the foreign university and provide training to students for degree programmes which are to be offered and conducted by the parent university. Furthermore, the National Policy Framework suggested that the establishment of these institutes needs to be regulated by ensuring that the parent institutions and courses are recognized in the country of origin as well as in Sri Lanka. To achieve this, it was recommended by the National Policy Framework that proper guidelines need to be set for the recognition of overseas institutions. And above all, the institutes should also be subject to quality and accreditation requirements (NEC, 2009).

#### **4. The Emerging Regulatory Issues**

Even for those non-state higher education institutions with degree awarding status granted by the Ministry of Higher Education there are issues in regard to the recognition of the degrees. This is when the regulatory body relevant to the subject/discipline does not see the approval of degree awarding in the same manner as the Ministry of Higher Education. While degree awarding institutes like the Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) and the National Institute of Business Management (NIBM) have not been questioned on their degree awarding status, the Medical degree offered by the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM) has been questioned by the regulatory body for the discipline of Medicine, viz., Sri Lanka Medical Council.

SAITM was established in 2009 and was granted degree awarding status for the subject of Medicine (MBBS) by Gazette No. 1721/19 of 2011 subject to fulfillment of several conditions stipulated in the Gazette, including the establishment of its own teaching hospital. After establishment of the Teaching Hospital in 2013, by Gazette

No. 1829/36 of 2013 the MBBS degree offered by SAIMM was fully recognized by the Ministry of Higher Education. The SLMC however refused to recognize the degree of SAIMM stating that the courses offered do not meet the required standards. In short, it is argued that the clinical training in the SAIMM affiliated hospital is inadequate due to the limitation of patients, and two courses (Forensic Medicine and Community Medicine) are not fully covered in the degree. Normally such courses can be covered in clinical training associated with Government hospitals. To fulfill these gaps, the SAIMM requested two government hospitals (Avisawella and Kaduwela) for training on a fee paying basis but the Government Medical Officers Association (GMOA) objected to granting such facility to SAIMM students.

Can a regulatory body like SLMC over-rule a decision made by the Ministry of Higher Education on recognition of a degree by following the due process ? This fact among others were the issues that the judgment on 31 January 2017 by the Appeal Court had to address. The court observed that the Sri Lanka Medical Council had no powers to decide whether or not to grant registrations or decide on the suitability of a university, which was the power vested with the Minister of Higher Education.<sup>4</sup> The verdict was that the SLMC should provisionally recognize SAIMM qualified students for registration and SAIMM is empowered to grant the MBBS degree. The SLMC and GMOA and some political parties have still not come into terms with this judgment.

There are a number of issues here which has made the matter complicated. First is an issue of double standards by the SLMC and GMOA as it is not logically clear to the outsider on what basis the Kotalawela Defence Academy which did not even possess its own Teaching Hospital at that time was granted the MBBS degree awarding status by the SLMC. Second, when it comes to standards of Medical degrees, should the government Medical Faculties be treated differently from the non-state actors ? Questions have been raised about the standard of teaching and training facilities in the Medical Faculties of Rajarata and Batticaloa where neither the SLMC nor the GMOA have made any comments. Third, it is an agreed fact that people's livelihoods are important and in that context Medical Doctors should be of

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<sup>4</sup>[http://www.economynext.com/Sri\\_Lanka\\_Medical\\_Council\\_used\\_double\\_standards,\\_exceeded\\_powers\\_Court-3-7225-10.html](http://www.economynext.com/Sri_Lanka_Medical_Council_used_double_standards,_exceeded_powers_Court-3-7225-10.html)

very high standards when it comes to dealing with a patients. However, this argument is equally valid to an Engineer who designs a Bridge or a Building or an Airline Pilot who has more than one life in his/her hand. Thus the so-called super standards cannot be confined only to one profession and the corresponding regulatory body acquiring the role of the sole custodian of standards has been questioned. Fourth, politics have made in-roads to the issue and thereby blurring the technical issues and bringing class issues to the forefront of the debate.

It is not my intention to get into this issue which has been amply covered in the existing literature, suffice is to say that it all boils down to one issue: the need for an overall independent accreditation board for monitoring standards of non-state universities. This becomes all the more important as the government intends to open more private medical colleges in the future as stated by the Minister of Higher Education. This brings me to next subtopic of need for an accreditation body.

### *The Need for an Accreditation Institution*

When the non-state institutions in higher education was growing in the economy, the last government recognized the need for an independent accreditation system to be in place instead of the existing approval system in the Ministry of Higher Education in order to recognize or reject the degrees offered by such non-state institutions. It was noted that the prevailing quality assurance mechanisms and regulatory systems have a very narrow coverage, excluding the vast non-state HEIs functioning independently.

In 2011, the government attempted to introduce new legislation under the Bill on Quality Assurance, Equalization, Qualification and Framework with the aim of uplifting the quality of the diplomas and degrees which were being offered by private sector degree awarding institutions. Under the proposed framework, degrees and diplomas awarded by the non-state sector were to be regulated to ensure quality. However, the government had to withdraw the proposed Bill owing to escalating protests from student groups and academics opposed to private HEIs. Student groups alleged that the Bill would curtail the free education currently enjoyed by the state-owned University students. Besides, the Federation of University Teachers'

Associations (FUTA) also opposed the Bill, on the grounds of transparency, in particular, the manner in which it was processed, arguing that the Bill should be discussed with all stakeholders including students, before being presented to Parliament. Although the draft Bill had been approved by the Cabinet in 2011, its provisions were never made fully public.

In these circumstances, with the aim of bringing private universities into operation while avoiding escalating conflicts, the then government took measures to attract foreign universities to set up campuses and research centres in ‘free investment zones’ as BOI approved projects (akin to the Malaysian Model – see Box 1). Under this scheme, foreign investors were to be offered land and tax concessions. The aim was to create a higher education hub in Sri Lanka which was cost effective for foreign students<sup>5</sup>. Also, the establishment of foreign branch universities in the country was expected to encourage local students to study at international universities at home and lessen the drain of foreign exchange from the country. In September 2013, a Gazette Extraordinary was tabled in Parliament to grant a 15-year tax holiday to a British university (University of Central Lancashire) that was planning to establish a branch campus in Sri Lanka. The then British Foreign Secretary, 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.<sup>6</sup> However, there was no positive outcome from any of these initiatives. Why? Because the foreign investors saw the student protest against such higher education institutions and the government’s ambivalent role in moving forward with the Quality Assurance, Equalization, Qualification and Framework for higher education. So they decided to take a “wait and see’ approach before committing their funds.

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<sup>5</sup> The Mahinda Chintana emphasized creating five hubs in Sri Lanka and one of them was a Knowledge Hub.

<sup>6</sup> Business Standard, (2014), “10 International Universities to Open Campuses in Sri Lanka”, [http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/10-international-universities-to-open-campuses-in-sri-lanka-114042300988\\_1.html](http://www.business-standard.com/article/news-ians/10-international-universities-to-open-campuses-in-sri-lanka-114042300988_1.html)

## **5. Technical Education and Vocational Training (TEVT)**

In this field also the role of non-state actors is gradually increasing. As of 2015, there were 718 registered non-state actors compared to 635 state actors in Technical Education and Vocational Training. Unlike the well known state sector Technical Education and Vocational and Training institutes like -- Department of Technical Education and Training (DTET), Vocational Training Authority (VTA), Sri Lanka National Apprenticeship and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA), Ceylon-German Technical Training Institute (CGTTI), National Youth Services Council (NYSC), University of Vocational Technology (UNIVOTEC), and National Institute of Fisheries and Nautical Engineering (NIFNE) – most non-state actors in Technical Education and Vocational and Training are not well known although their numbers are larger than the state sector.

A Technical and Vocational Education Commission was established in 1991 and has put into place a system of registration and accreditation of courses to establish and maintain a credible system of quality assurance for Technical Education and Vocational Training. In 2005, the National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) was put in place and in 2008 the University of Vocational Technology was established to award National Vocational Qualification degree equivalent. The 718 registered non-state Technical Education and Vocational Training institutes offered 703 accredited courses and were responsible for 16,462 National Vocational Qualification certificates – 40 per cent of certificates in 2015.

But there are unresolved issues. Only 39 per cent of non-state Technical Education and Vocational Training institutes are registered with the Technical Education and Vocational Commission as they cannot meet the required standards and infrastructure facilities. Only 26 per cent of the non-state Technical Education and Vocational Training institutions offer National Vocational Qualification and all others offer non-National Vocational Qualification. There is a need for more private-public sector partnerships and coordination to uplift the standards of some non-state actors. Clearly accreditation is an issue for the non-state sector Technical Education and Vocational Training sector just as it is for the degree awarding Universities and Institutions from the non-state sector.

## 6. Way Forward

For those who oppose the increasing role of non-state actors in the higher education in Sri Lanka, the simplest thing to say is that we must curtail the growth of non-state actors in higher education and increase the capacity of student in-take of the established state Universities. It is true that allocation of expenditure for education in Sri Lanka is only 1.2 per cent of GDP compared to 6.3 per cent in Malaysia, 3.4 per cent in both Indonesia and Philippines, 3 per cent in Singapore, 4.1 per cent in Nepal and 3.8 per cent in India. The option for increasing this expenditure in Sri Lanka is limited given the current fiscal constraints. An entire overhaul of the Budget is required if we are to increase education expenditure significantly which is not possible in the short run.

Various options to increase the student in-take under the state University framework have been discussed, such as night shifts, distant learning, etc., without any practical outcome. In this context, what the country needs is some form of a private public partnership for the higher education sector upliftment, in particular, to address the crucial areas like limited student intake to Universities. I have highlighted in the appendix some of the private-public partnerships that have worked in other countries which Sri Lanka can consider to emulate with due country specific adjustments.

In the 2017 Budget Proposals, the Finance Minister referred to the students who missed out University entrance by an insignificant margin and proposed a loan scheme up to maximum of Rs. 800,000 per student for the entire course of studies. The loan will be interest free and will be offered to 15,000 students based on the Z score to follow courses in UGC approved non-state degree awarding institutions. Rs. 300 million was earmarked for this purpose (Article 117, Budget Speech, 2016). The Minister further stated that in order to ensure good quality degrees, non-state higher education institutions should be allowed to offer courses accredited by state Universities (Article 116, Budget Speech 2016).

Based on the powers vested under Sections 29(e), 29(p) 29(r) and 29(s) of the Universities Act No. 16 of 1978 as subsequently amended, and after having consulted several Vice-Chancellors of State Universities, the UGC at its 956<sup>th</sup> meeting held on 05.01.2017 approved and decided to submit the proposal for a

"Partnership between Universities and Recognized Institutions to Expand Opportunities for Higher Education". It envisages expanding higher education by offering three year job oriented degree programmes of selected State Universities, delivered to students through Recognized Institutions and financed under the Budget 2017 proposed student loan scheme. The selected students who are supported by the student loan scheme have to be readily employable upon their graduation to recover the outstanding loan and to obtain their contribution to the national economy. One can in fact consider this as a positive step in the way forward with private-public partnerships.

Speaking about the way forward, we must not miss to mention about the current status of state Universities in Sri Lanka. There is an urgent need to grant them more autonomy to raise their own funds. A case in point is the PIM of the University of Sri Jayawardenapura where I have served as a board member for the last five years. The PIM has been self-financed since 2002 and does not depend on the government for any funds. Consequently, it has managed to acquire more autonomy and go into more ambitious expansion plans compared to other state Universities. I believe that all State funded Universities can benefit from such autonomous status.

This autonomy is also required to become competitive and improve quality and standards of state Universities. I have already referred to the quality of State University Medical Faculties, but it does not stop there. The overall quality of a number of state Universities have declined over the years. As the World Bank (2008) report highlighted, none of the Sri Lankan Universities are among the first 500 in the world. Almost ten years later, I can say that all state Universities are ranked below 2000 – Colombo University is ranked at 2171 (best) and the KDA is ranked at 9,938. This is compared to some Asian Universities like NUS ranked at 24, Peking University at 29 and Tokyo University at 39. Recently, Prof. Sunethra Weerakoon a retiring Professor of the University of Sri Jayawardenapura highlighted the following facts in regard to the quality of state Universities: (a) incompetence and collusion among management personnel and academic staff; (b) lethargy of university administration and lapses in strategic management oversight; (c) poor motivation in regard to academic curiosity or scholarly achievements; (d) politicization, and so on; and strongly recommended an independent body for monitoring state Universities (*The Sunday Times*, Education Times, 29 January

2017). So what do all this point to. We need an apex independent accreditation body that covers not only non-state sector institutions in higher education but also state sector institutions in higher education in the country.

In fact, the National Education Commission (2009) recommended the establishment of a National Quality Assurance Accreditation Council (NQAAC) by an Act of Parliament, as an independent body appointed by the President, to cover all areas of higher education and technical and vocational education in Sri Lanka. Clearly, setting a national standard in the country for all tertiary providers will help reduce doubt and controversy surrounding private providers. The National Education Commission proposes that the National Quality Assurance Accreditation Council should be established by an Act of Parliament and its governing body should include officials from both the higher education and Technical Education and Vocational Training sector. This body is to be empowered with the right to award recognition to institutes and universities. The National Quality Assurance Accreditation Council will set national standards and guidelines to be followed by all tertiary education providers. They will also conduct cyclical reviews of all academic activities of these institutes to ensure the quality of all programmes offered within the higher education and Technical Education and Vocational Training sector (NEC, 2009).

In a recent interview, the State Minister of Higher Education, Hon. Mohan Lal Grero stated: “In the future we are planning to establish an Independent Quality Assurance and Accreditation Commission. We are in the process of drafting the Bill now. After this is established, then it will be compulsory for all institutes to go to the Commission and get themselves accredited. The Commission will be the authority” (*Daily Mirror*, 20 December 2016). This should be welcomed and what we need today is an overall autonomous body to accredit both state and non-state actors in higher education in this country.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

We can have a national Independent Accreditation System and create a more suitable environment to uplift the standards of state universities and encourage participation of private players in the higher education system but that itself is not adequate. We also need to change the mind-set of the people of this country

For long years, Sri Lanka nurtured a welfare state that was inherited from the British rule. This welfare state led many stakeholders to consider free education as an entitlement for everyone. But as the state failed to provide free education to all those who qualified for higher education, the debate shifted from free education to freedom of education. Freedom of education is a constitutional and a fundamental right of every citizen of the country. In that context, every citizen had a right to education. However, many stakeholders in this country have failed to come to terms with the concept of freedom of education and right to education.

The perception on private HEI is very much influenced by class and past politics of the country too. It ranges from the perceptions of rich having free access to education, exacerbating the income disparity leading to inequitable access to higher education, turning education into a ‘commodity’, and so on. Fuel to these perceptions is added by opportunistic politicians and student groups affiliated to various political parties. Thus, together with establishing an accreditation authority, a public sensitization programme highlighting the importance of non-state actors in higher education should be initiated by the government.

Some of the best Universities in this world like Harvard in USA and Cambridge in UK are privately owned. South Korea, for instance, has the highest number of private sector institutions in the higher education sector. Thus there is a need to recognize that other countries have grown and developed with the support of non-state actors participation in higher education.

The rapid development of technology has spread mobile learning courses all over the world. Libraries are getting less relevant as bulk of the required references can be obtained online for studying. Thus there is a need to recognize that the state’s controlling power to prevent the penetration of non-state actors to higher education

related services is gradually weakening. And there is a need to accommodate them with the necessary checks and balances.

Sri Lanka needs to see the active participation of non-state actors in higher education positively. The concerns that the stakeholders have in regard to quality of education services is the key challenge that needs to be addressed. It is not an insurmountable challenge. With the necessary dialogue and political will, the challenge could be met easily like most other developing countries have done. With meeting this challenge, Sri Lanka could move to greater heights in higher education and accomplish many other economic goals in its progress towards a middle income country.

I thank you.