

Private-Public Partnerships seen as a way out of higher education crises

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Dr. Saman Kelegama

By Lynn Ockersz

Private-Public Partnerships are a key to resolving some of the current crises plaguing the higher education sector in Sri Lanka, Executive Director, Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka Dr. Saman Kelegama said.

'One of the key strategies for expanding access to higher education is the expansion of the private higher education sector. A number of studies have shown that the rates of return on investment in higher education is high. Private investment in university education – operated under state regulations and standards – could improve the quality of education through competition, enhanced access to university education and resource allocation, etc., Dr. Kelegama explained, among other things, while delivering the 27th J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Lecture on Monday at the auditorium of the Sri Lanka Foundation Institute in Colombo. The lecture was organized by The J.E. Jayasuriya Memorial Foundation.

In his wide-ranging, well researched presentation, Kelegama cautioned, however, that 'PPPs in higher education can be very challenging. It is the responsibility of the government to understand the constraints in expanding the private sector's share in tertiary education, and follow due process to mitigate its adverse effects.' He said that as a solution to minimizing income disparities, the government could award scholarships, subsidies and low-interest loans on merit to deserving students, 'as recommended by the National Education Commission.'

Touching on the SAIMT problem and the issues growing out of it, Kelegama raised the question as to whether the Sri Lanka Medical Council could over rule a decision taken by the Minister of Higher Education. He said that it was a case of double standards that while SAIMT was being viewed critically by the SLMC and some organizations campaigning against SAIMT with regard to educational quality standards and other requirements, the medical faculty at the Kotelawala Defence University, for example, escaped such critical scrutiny. There were other medical faculties in this country too whose educational quality standards could be easily subjected to critical evaluation, it was pointed out. Kelegama explained that the politics stemming from the SAIMT question are currently tending to blur the more technical matters relating to the issue.

Elaborating on other issue areas, Kelegama pointed out that a lack of quality in policy formulation and in regulatory institutions had emerged as a problem to be addressed in the local higher education

context. He said that there needed to be a single, independent accreditation body to oversee and monitor both public and private universities in Sri Lanka. He added that all universities operating locally need to be vested with a degree of financial autonomy to enable them to raise sufficient funds to administer their affairs. The Post Graduate Institute of Management is self-funding and has proved a success story, from this point of view.

Kelegama pointed out that a mindset change is required on the part of all concerned with regard to these questions in tertiary education. Freedom of Education is as vital as the Right to Education. Sri Lanka is badly in need of a public sensitization programme on Private-Public Partnerships in higher education. The non-state sector must be viewed positively by the concerned quarters.