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## IPS Head says sensible import of Knowledge Workers okay

June 29, 2015, 6:15 pm



**Dr. Saman Kelegama**

by Sanath Nanayakkare

Dr. Saman Kelegama, Executive Director of the Institute of Policy Studies making a strong case for sensible liberalization of professional services recently said import of high quality Knowledge Workers is an option available for Sri Lanka, to deal with its current skills gap and to readily supply the talent pool today's businesses need.

Kelegama made this remark addressing leading professional figures from diverse sectors who come together to share their thoughts at an interactive seminar held on the theme, 'Liberalization of Professional Services, Challenges & Opportunities, Risks & Safeguards', at the CA Sri Lanka auditorium last week.

"We do have world class professionals and knowledge workers in many sectors, but the numbers are lacking. So we might as well develop a

mechanism with necessary safeguards to benefit from this option enabling knowledge transfer in the process, Kelegama said.

Providing actionable insights on tertiary and vocational education development in the medium and long term, he stressed the need to empower the youth through education reforms leading to flexible pathways to degrees.

He pointed out that the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) could be used effectively in this regard which is a treaty of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

"If we make a clearly defined GATS binding, it can serve as an impetus to attract Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) to Sri Lanka even without tax incentives. For GATS to work out beneficially, the regulatory framework has to be put in place," Kelegama noted.

"Our skills gap worsened over time due to several reasons; the professional brain drain between 1980s and 1990s, the setting up of new establishments related to healthcare, education, leisure sectors etc. which demanded more high quality professionals. Further, the global economic growth is driven by technological change. This required the service sector to be optimized to deliver superior performance.

Illustrating that import of knowledge and skilled workers is not new to Sri Lanka, he noted, "Now there are Chinese cooks in some restaurants that serve real ethnic Chinese food. Cricket coaches have come from other countries that play the 'gentleman's game'. Foreign doctors have worked here. And dating back to olden times, the Dawson Tower in Kadugannawa reminds us of the work done by the British royal engineer, he said.

"It's reported that we need 15,000 construction industry personnel and we have only 11,000. A large number of doctors and nurses are required too. The US has the HB1 visa and Australia has the temporary business resident visa to redress this issue. For a developing country like ours, GATS framework could be the best choice, he said.

All members of the WTO are signatories to the GATS. The basic WTO principle of most favoured nation (MFN) applies to GATS as well. However, upon accession, members may introduce temporary exemptions to this rule.

Resource panel comprised Arjuna Herath, president, CA Sri Lanka, Saliya Pieris, Deputy President of the Bar Association of Sri Lanka, Reyaz Mihular, Managing Partner of KPMG and Dr. Ruvaiz Haniffa, Immediate Past Secretary of the Sri Lanka Medical Association.

Ranel Wijesinha, past president, CA Sri Lanka, and the Confederation of Asian and Pacific Accountants, who is also the founder of the Thought Leadership Forum was the moderator of the interactive session.

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When the floor was opened for questions and there was absolute silence in the audience, Ranel said, "Now, this goes to show the fundamental characteristic of Sri Lankans. They keep quiet during the Q and A and start raising their fears and concerns at the cocktails."

That witty yet true remark did the trick and got everyone talking making it an animated and honest and candid discussion. One professional went on to say, "We're beginning to sound like a small secret society trying to further our interests. We must consider the consumers' point of view in this regard too. In this transforming economy, we must also take their opinion on board about their service providers."

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- Duleep Mendis
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