

PRIVATE HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKA: A PERFECT WAY TO BLURRY FREE EDUCATION?

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Abstract

The educational sector of Sri Lanka has always been centered around the idea of free education provided by the state. Consequently, there is good literacy, and more of the population has opportunities to study. Nevertheless, recently, this positive trend has been reversed. It should be mentioned that private higher educational institutions in Sri Lanka have come into being as the demand for a high level of education is rapidly growing, given increased enrollment rates, changes in demographics, and progressive career aspirations. The present public university system faces hurdles in adjusting to the increasing student population while ensuring the quality of education. This problem has allowed the growth of private universities in Sri Lanka. This transition from public education to private universities raises questions about whether Sri Lankans will have access to free education in the future. Although public education has been a mainstay of Sri Lanka's education system, the rise of private colleges heralds both challenges and opportunities. This paper provides policy recommendations for a sustainable education model in the light of private higher education in Sri Lanka by carefully analyzing the historical evolution, the debate over private higher education in Sri Lanka, and the lessons learned from the global experiences using the most efficient secondary data collection method known as "keyword search" methodology using online articles. A well-balanced strategy that strengthens public universities while also regulating and supporting private institutions, Clear regulations, and accreditation processes are also essential for private and higher education providers. In addition, Quality assurance mechanisms will guarantee high-caliber education for students, whether they attend public or private institutions. This balanced approach ensures a sustainable and equitable education model for Sri Lanka.

Keywords: Free Education, Non-state Higher Education, Private Higher Education, Private Universities, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

Private higher education in Sri Lanka has been growing in recent years. This trend is part of broader public sector reforms to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability (Lee & Gopinathan, 2008). The main issue connected to this trend is that the public sector reforms in Sri Lanka have included Private higher education in their agenda by establishing private universities and colleges. Various factors have provoked these reforms, including cost reductions and budgetary constraints, the expectation of improved service quality, a lack of skilled staff, and government regulations.

In addition, the drive towards privatization of higher education in Sri Lanka has been fueled by the need to cope with the escalating demand for tertiary education and widen the choices of the students. Although privatization seems to benefit some areas within the education sector in Sri Lanka, it is equally important to weigh in on some shortcomings that are likely to affect these sectors. It should be ensured that the effects, which will be negative and positive due to privatization, will have to be measured carefully, bearing in mind the importance of free education available to students.

Methodology

This study has used secondary data available online. The “Key Word Search” methodology was applied to this study. Keyword search is one of the most resourceful methods of collecting indexed online data. Initially, concepts related to the study topic were formed. Based on the topic, the keywords are formulated. “Private Higher Education,” “Non-State Higher Education,” “Private Universities in Sri Lanka,” “Free Education,” and “Higher Education” were googled, and 30 reliable online articles matched the study. Articles were filtered from the 1st of January 2006 to the 31st of May 2024. Then, duplicates and implied concepts, synonyms, and antonyms were removed.

Discussion

Evolution of the Higher Education Sector in Sri Lanka

The higher education sector in Sri Lanka has evolved significantly over the years. Historically, it was dominated by public universities established to provide accessible and quality education to the nation's youth (AEDB, 2016). However, rapid demographic changes, increased demand for specialized skills, and the need to cater to diverse career aspirations have led to the emergence of private universities in recent decades (Abeygunawardhana, 2018). This transition reflects a global trend towards diversification in higher education provision and a greater focus on employability (Altbach & Knight, 2007). The higher education sector in Sri Lanka has undergone a dynamic evolution that mirrors the nation's socioeconomic transformation and shifting educational paradigms. Historically, the sector was characterized by the dominance of public universities, established to provide accessible and quality education to the country's burgeoning youth population (AEDB, 2016). This era witnessed the establishment of prominent institutions such as the University of Colombo, the University of Peradeniya, and the University of Moratuwa, each with unique academic strengths and contributions. Nonetheless, the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka has drastically changed over the past few years. The quick demographic shifts and global job market changes have necessitated rethinking conventional higher education constructs. Private universities have emerged as an alternative to the normal public university system. They are privately run and have become important educational institutions that adapt to societal changes.

The rise in private universities is both a local phenomenon and part of the broader international trend towards diversification of tertiary education. This trend has been identified by scholars like Altbach and Knight (2007), who emphasize the importance of universities adapting to meet the demands of a rapidly

changing world by offering programs that enhance graduates' employability and readiness for the modern workforce.

The fact that private universities exist indicates how dynamic this sector can be. At the same time, it tries to cater to transforming needs among students and employers during a time of globalization and technological progress. This transition aligns with global trends toward diversification and increased focus on employability and specialized skills (Altbach & Knight, 2007).

The Emergence of Private Universities

The emergence of private universities in Sri Lanka marks a significant shift in the country's higher education landscape (Craddock, 2017). In recent years, the government has established new universities and higher educational institutes to increase opportunities for higher education and diversify the field. However, apart from the regulated government institutions, many private universities and institutes offer degrees and diplomas outside the purview of the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka. Many private institutions affiliate with foreign universities or operate independently within Sri Lanka. The emergence of private universities has been driven by several factors (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). These factors include the increasing demand for higher education, limited space in government universities, the need for specialized and industry-oriented programs, and the desire for more flexible and innovative educational approaches.

“Private universities in Sri Lanka have grown significantly over the past decade, with increased institutions and student enrollments. Private institutions and the higher education sector in Sri Lanka produce around 11,000 graduates each year for the economy (National Education Commission of Sri Lanka, 2019). This growth in private universities has expanded access to higher education and introduced diverse academic programs and disciplines.

The emergence of private universities in Sri Lanka has provided a new avenue for students to pursue higher education and has contributed to the overall growth and development of the higher education sector in the country (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). The emergence of Private Universities has addressed certain burning issues in higher education as it marks a notable shift in the landscape of higher education in Sri Lanka. For instance, it has increased student options and opportunities, addressed government universities' limited space, and catered to the demand for specialized and industry-oriented programs. The tension of establishing Private universities and Higher Education institutions (HEI) has also raised concerns about quality assurance and education standards. The rise of private universities in Sri Lanka is affected by controversial factors that cater to the changing educational landscape, evolving student expectations, and job market demands. However, it was noted that the “prevailing Quality assurance mechanisms and regulatory systems are very narrow, and there is a tendency for non-state Higher Education institutions in the country to act independently” (Daily Mirror, 2017).

Although a Quality Accreditation and Assurance (QAA) unit was established at the UGC in 2004, under which reviews of Sri Lankan universities have been conducted, there is no overarching structure of quality assurance or accreditation for the different types of Higher Education Institutes (HEI) in Sri Lanka. These systems vary by institute (UNESCO, 2022). Especially when it comes to the Degree awarding Private HEIs, non-UGC HEIs have the autonomy to act independently after the initial registration, and the private sector is largely uncovered. The ambiguity regarding regulatory frameworks within which universities can establish and operate has been a significant hindrance to increasing private sector participation in higher education (UNESCO, 2022). Therefore, the public's perception of private universities has become controversial regarding quality.

The Debate over Private Higher Education in Sri Lanka

The privatization of higher education in Sri Lanka has been a subject of debate and discussion (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). Those in favor of privatization argue that state-run institutions, due to lack of autonomy and incentives, cannot innovate. Privatization can introduce competition among universities and improve the quality of education. Also, universities can bring in international students who will pay higher tuition fees. It will also eliminate the need for government to bear higher education costs. In contrast, those against privatization argue that it can increase social inequality. Only the middle and upper classes of society can afford university education. High-quality education will become a commodity rather than a right of every person.

Furthermore, the profit-centered motivation for running educational institutions may cover the real intent of education to benefit students. Quality of teaching, research, and knowledge dissemination may decline. They also raise concerns about the potential erosion of academic freedom and the loss of control over curriculum and research agenda that could result from private ownership (Lee, 2008).

The sources provided show that the privatization of higher education in Sri Lanka has advantages and disadvantages (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). It is important to carefully evaluate the impact of privatization on accessibility, academic integrity, and equity (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). Some believe that introducing Private HEI could generate the country's revenues by increasing the competition in the market and attracting foreign students.

However, it cannot be forgotten that private higher education could increase inequality as those who could afford it could access private universities, and low-income families might leave. While privatization may bring in additional funding and resources, there is a risk that it may exclude students from low-income backgrounds (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). It is factual that nearly 150,000 students are eligible for higher education annually in Sri Lanka, whereas state universities can only enroll 42,000 (Daily News, 2024). Only 17% of the eligible students are enrolled in the state university system.

Furthermore, critics also raise concerns about the commercialization of education and the potential erosion of academic freedom, and ultimately, higher education could be a tradable commodity (Counterpoint, 2018). Many critics also worry about the impact of privatization on the overall Sri Lankan society, arguing that higher education should be a public good accessible to all, not just the wealthy few.

Moreover, the potential prioritization of profit over the welfare of students raises ethical and moral concerns. Private institutions may focus more on financial gains rather than the holistic development and well-being of the students (UNESCO, 2016). In such an environment, free education might be at risk. This shift in priorities could lead to a decline in the overall quality of education and the student experience.

In addition, when academic freedom is no more, it could hinder diverse perspectives and innovative thinking. When profit motives drive educational institutions, there is a risk of constraining intellectual exploration and critical inquiry in favor of commercially viable topics and approaches. This risk has motivated the clash between the commodification of higher education and the free education available in Sri Lanka. "If education and higher education are gradually converted into a commodity and just another business opportunity, then it is possible that the positive social outcomes that Sri Lanka is proud

of – as demonstrated by high ‘quality of life’ indices in health and literacy rates that we have attained – may be lost for the future generations” (Counterpoint, 2018).

The decision on whether to private higher education in Sri Lanka should consider the potential impacts on accessibility, academic integrity, and equity. The debate over privatizing higher education in Sri Lanka is complex in nature as it is a sensitive issue. Long-term implications for society should be carefully analyzed. Ultimately, the decision on whether to private higher education in Sri Lanka should be made to ensure that quality education remains available to all, with notable academic freedom, encourages critical thinking, and serves the needs of society.

Moreover, privatization could shift focus towards profit-making rather than pursuing knowledge and academic excellence. Considering these concerns, alternatives to privatization, such as stronger public investment in higher education and promoting public-private partnerships, should also be considered (Narayana, 2006).

Private higher education in Sri Lanka indeed has the potential to bring in additional funding and resources. However, it also raises concerns about increased inequality and commercialization of education (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). A tentative model for public funding in Sri Lanka needs to be developed to ensure equitable access to higher education and align with national economic development goals (Craddock, 2017).

Therefore, the future of free education in Sri Lanka is at a crossroads with the growing popularity of private higher education institutions (Randiwela & Herath, 2012). Therefore, it is essential to balance the benefits and drawbacks of privatization and consider alternative approaches that prioritize accessibility, academic integrity, and equity in higher education reform.

Lessons from Global Experiences

Lessons from other countries that adopted Private Higher Education provide valuable insights into the shift of higher education. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that it is important to recognize and respect the unique landscape of Sri Lanka in application. Case studies from Japan, Malaysia, Korea, and India may showcase the potential benefits and drawbacks of Private higher education. However, it is equally essential to examine the challenges and unplanned consequences of the privatization of higher education in these nations. Moreover, “it is critical to consider the specific needs and requirements of Sri Lankan society, considering factors such as cultural values, socio-economic conditions, and educational infrastructure” (Mok, 2015).

In the context of Japan, Private higher education has undergone significant changes and developments in recent years. Various factors, including demographic shifts, economic developments, and the growing demand for specialized education, have influenced these changes. “Many private higher educational institutions in Japan have responded to these challenges by implementing innovative strategies to counter decreased enrollments and financial constraints” (Tai, 2018).

Diversification of higher education is one important strategy that private higher education institutions have adopted in Japan. Private higher education institutions in Japan have recognized the need to offer various programs and courses to attract students. This diversification includes introducing new and unique courses, collaborations with industry, and establishing specialized departments or schools within the institution. In addition, private higher education institutions in Japan have also focused on internationalization to attract students and enhance their global reputation (Kuwamura, 2009).

Maintenance of education quality is another lesson that could be drawn from private higher education in Japan (Tai, 2018). Efforts must be made to ensure that educational standards are not compromised despite financial constraints and the need to attract students. This can be achieved through “continuous assessment and improvement of teaching methods, curriculum development, faculty development programs, and investment in educational resources” (Lassegard, 2016). Furthermore, collaboration and partnerships with industry and government have also proven effective in addressing the challenges private higher education institutions face in Japan (Huang, 2014).

Malaysia obtains private higher education to absorb excess demand, which has important lessons for other countries. At the same time, the Malaysian government plays a key role in developing private higher education in the country by providing a regulatory framework and quality assurance. The significant increase in access is made possible through “considerable government subsidies in the form of cheap student loans and scholarships”, a lesson Malaysia could provide for Sri Lanka (Tham, 2011). Also, “Malaysia has the most appreciation for quality assurance efforts by the government to preserve the integrity of the programs offered, especially since loans and scholarships are only provided for accredited programs” (Tham, 2011).

However, according to the World Bank (2006), several drawbacks also could be taken by other countries that Malaysia has adopted. Planning financial support in other countries is critical as only 25% of the loans given to the students have been recovered per the schedule. Further, it should be noted that the effectiveness of the monitoring process is still questionable due to the fast-growing number of Private HEIs in Malaysia (Tham, 2011).

Korea is another good example of a country that has experienced significant growth in its higher education sector by expanding private universities. This expansion has led to “increased access to higher education for Korean students and contributed to the overall development of the country” (Kim, 2008). The government has not only opened the sector for private and overseas operators but also played a role in releasing private universities to facilitate their growth. This approach has allowed for diverse institutions and programs, giving students more options and catering to different needs and interests within the higher education sector. Private higher education institutions in Korea have always been managed under the government’s regulatory framework. The government has sole authority over the establishment of private higher education institutions. While private higher education institutions are not public employees, they are still required to meet the government’s regulatory requirements on enrolment quotas, admission procedures, the establishment of new institutions, academic courses, and financial allocations and expenditures (Kim, 2008).

By observing the Korean private higher education model, Sri Lanka can learn the importance of balancing regulating and promoting private higher education. This balance is crucial to ensure educational equity, as the expansion of private higher education in Korea, led by private resources, has resulted in some degree of educational inequity.

On the other hand, Korea has drawn some drawbacks. While private higher education in Korea has shown significant growth, it has also raised concerns regarding educational equity. The expansion of private universities has led to a tiered system of education, where students from wealthier backgrounds have better access to high-quality education. At the same time, students from lower-income households may struggle to afford or access the same level of education, and ultimately, it widens the gap between the rich and the poor and affordable and unaffordable. Ultimately, it affects the structure of the society.

This is a timely lesson that Sri Lanka should consider in setting up private higher education in Sri Lanka unless implementations will completely challenge the welfare state.

Private higher education in India has been steadily growing and making significant contributions to the education landscape of the country (Joshi & Ahir, 2015). However, several issues and challenges must be addressed to ensure the quality and effectiveness of private higher education in India (Tilak, 2018). One of the most controversial issues with Private higher education in India is the lack of regulations related to private higher education and lack of oversight. This has a major impact on the quality of Indian Private higher education. The unaffordability of tuition fees is another burning issue with private higher education as it is comparatively more expensive than public institutions and makes it inaccessible to low-income students. The system continues to face several challenges, such as limited funding to support academic programs; limited participation rates for low-income students, females, and minorities; difficulty recruiting and retaining young academic and research faculty; inadequate research capacities; limited ICT infrastructure to enhance instruction and curriculum delivery and inadequate facilities to support science and technology education (Navani, 2020). These challenges hinder the growth of private higher education in India. As Thomas and Basi (2018) emphasize in their study, stringent regulatory mechanisms to ensure quality standards, promoting financial assistance programs to make private education more affordable and accessible, investing in faculty development and infrastructure improvement, and fostering collaborations between private institutions and industry to enhance the relevance and employability of graduates could promote the private higher education in India. Further, it also requires the accommodation of lower-income students, females, and minorities by addressing the social and cultural barriers that prevent the above groups from entering private higher education in India (Atuahene, 2013).

Future of Higher Education: Prospects and Challenges in Sri Lanka

Private higher education in Sri Lanka is always a complex phenomenon with antagonistic arguments. The promoters of private higher education argue that it will bring innovation, increased efficiency, and improved quality of education through market competition. In addition, they claim that private higher education can help address the limited capacity of state universities and provide more opportunities for students to access higher education. On the other hand, “opponents of privatization raise concerns about the potential for increased inequality, commercialization of education, and the erosion of academic freedom” (Somaratna, 2020). They argue that private higher education may hinder the opportunities in the hands of a few, leaving marginalized groups and low-income students with limited access to quality education (Randiwela & Herath, 2012).

Furthermore, private higher education will prioritize profit over educational outcomes, leading to a decline in academic standards and an emphasis on vocational training rather than holistic education (Lee, 2008). Moreover, critics argue that privatization may contribute to the commodification of education, treating it as a product to be bought and sold rather than a public good that benefits society. However, it is important for Sri Lanka to carefully consider the potential consequences and benefits of privatizing higher education (Randiwela & Herath, 2012).

In 2019, the government presented three separate Cabinet Memorandum to establish “Chartered Universities,” restructuring universities, and free education investment zones. These memorandums were highly criticized for not consulting the stakeholders. Chartered universities are privately led nonprofit universities, and the focus of these universities must be on the public good and not on the profits. Restructuring universities by increasing student enrollment by 25% by upgrading institutes awarding NVQ level 6 or above into university colleges. Free education zones with public and private

partnerships to attract foreign students (Colombo Telegraph, 2024). These developments are questionable due to the ongoing protests of private higher education in Sri Lanka. Chartered universities are a timely decision, but the issue is who will find these universities if there is no profit. Also, free education zones are useless if the Sri Lankan students eligible for free education cannot access them. Increasing university enrollment by 25% is a nightmare without increasing the required resources (Colombo Telegraph, 2024).

Due to the economic crisis in Sri Lanka, most middle-class parents are pushing their children to degree programs without sitting the G.C.E. A/L examinations. This is a good option for students to start their careers early (Meepage, 2024). In such an environment, private higher education is a more important platform for pursuing degrees without sitting for advanced-level examinations.

However, it should be remembered that Private higher education in Sri Lanka may bring about advanced innovative practices and public-private partnerships. However, it must also blur the tensions between education as a public good and a marketable commodity. Ultimately, the decision to pursue private higher education should highly prioritize the goals of providing quality education, promoting social equity, and ensuring that higher education serves the long-term development needs of Sri Lanka.

Conclusion and Policy Recommendations for Sustainable Education Model

A well-balanced strategy should be adopted for sustainable higher education. This approach should strengthen public universities while also regulating and supporting private institutions. Ensuring quality and accessibility is crucial in promoting private higher education in the Sri Lankan context. The government must invest in enhancing undergraduate programs, revising curricula, training educators, and providing necessary resources for both public and private colleges.

Clear regulations and accreditation processes are also essential for private and higher education providers. Quality assurance mechanisms will guarantee high-caliber education for students, whether they attend public or private institutions. This balanced approach ensures a sustainable and equitable education model for Sri Lanka.

Overall, private higher education in Sri Lanka has its potential benefits and drawbacks. Therefore, balancing the higher education model in public and private provision is essential, ensuring quality, accessibility, and relevance. Introducing a public funding strategy for the higher education sector in Sri Lanka is crucial to address concerns regarding the skills gap and economic development. Furthermore, the government should prioritize investment in research and development, fostering collaboration between universities, industries, and research institutions to drive innovation and address national challenges.

In conclusion, while there may be tension between the ideas of higher education as a public good and a profit-making commodity, privatization has led to new practices and collaborations in the higher education sector. Therefore, a carefully monitored and decent approach to mixing public and private higher education can help tackle the problems and guarantee sustainable and quality education in Sri Lanka. This method would ensure accessibility, quality, and relevance in higher education, encouraging innovation cooperation among institutions. By doing so, Sri Lanka could support private higher education without destroying free education.

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