

PUBLIC-PRIVATE PARTNERSHIPS IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A TIMELY SOLUTION FOR THE CONTROVERSIES IN SRI LANKAN HIGHER EDUCATION?HNK Galahitiyawa¹**Abstract**

Public universities in Sri Lanka face numerous financial difficulties, decrepit academic infrastructure, and slow-moving administrative protocols, making it challenging to compete with financially supported private educational facilities. Although Public-private partnerships offer a promising solution to the challenges faced by the higher education sector in Sri Lanka, the potential benefits and challenges of public-private partnerships (PPPs) in Sri Lankan higher education remain subject to debate. This paper provides an overview of the potential benefits and challenges of public-private partnerships in higher education in Sri Lanka by carefully examining the concepts, theories, and lessons that can be learned from global experiences. It uses a secondary research approach to critically analyze public-private Partnerships in higher education with special reference to Sri Lanka. Among the potential benefits, upgrading facilities, fostering collaboration, the potential to address perceived inequalities, promoting greater diversity and inclusion, role in fostering innovation and responsiveness, adoption of new technologies and pedagogical approaches, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning, collaborative research projects, culture of entrepreneurship and innovation, internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of experiential learning were prominent. Despite the potential benefits, PPPs in higher education also pose several challenges that need to be carefully addressed. Exacerbating inequalities, commodification of higher education, increased tuition fees, and maintaining quality standards in PPPs require healthy regulatory frameworks, accreditation processes, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the performance of private providers require careful attention. PPPs offer significant potential for enhancing higher education in Sri Lanka. To fully leverage the benefits of these partnerships while minimizing inherent risks, it is essential to establish a comprehensive and well-defined regulatory framework in a country that values free education.

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Introduction

The world of higher education is undergoing a significant shift, driven by a growing demand for accessibility, affordability, and quality (Zain et al., 2013). This change is made even more challenging by ongoing inequalities and the pressing need for better collaboration among different stakeholders (Jayawardena, 2017). Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) have surfaced as a promising solution to tackle these issues, providing a collaborative framework that leverages the strengths of both public and private sectors (Koning, 2018).

In developing countries, public-private partnerships in education are particularly encouraged, as many governments struggle to cover education costs due to their economic situations (Bray, 1999). In this context, PPPs have been recognized as a practical way to manage financial and administrative challenges in education effectively (URT 2009; Brans 2011; Patrinos and Sosale, 2007).

The ability of PPPs to help close the digital divide, especially where significant investments are needed, highlights their role in making resources more accessible to everyone (Younus et al, 2024). However, rolling out PPPs in higher education comes with its own set of challenges and potential drawbacks, necessitating a thoughtful approach to ensure fair outcomes and true collaboration (“Public-Private Partnerships in Education,” 2006). It’s crucial to have a well-rounded understanding of PPPs, given their complex nature and the various impacts they can have across different sectors, before evaluating their relevance to higher education (Wang, 2009).

Over the past decade, the globalization and governing of education through Public Private Partnerships have generated considerable debate as to their meaning, purpose, status, and outcomes. “This debate is particularly heated in the education sector because of the widely held view that education is a complex social and political activity that should remain largely, if not wholly, in the public sector, serving public interests” (Robertson et al, 2012).

Similarly, the Sri Lankan higher education sector is also dominated by the public sector. However, the demand for quality education and the need to accommodate a growing number of students have led to the establishment of private universities. These institutions have been established to provide learners with options for those who failed to get admission to the relatively elite state universities (Meepage, 2024).

The issue with Private universities is that they are not adequately regulated to ensure the maintenance of acceptable quality standards related to all aspects of university education. “The nonexistence of an accreditation system makes it difficult to regulate the quality of programs” (ADB, 2024).

One potential solution to these challenges is the PPPs model. A PPP is a collaboration between government entities and private organizations aimed at delivering public services or infrastructure. In the context of higher education, PPPs could involve private investment in educational institutions, provision of resources, curriculum development, and employment training. This model could provide access to additional resources, innovative practices, and greater efficiency in addressing the gaps in the system.

However, the potential benefits and challenges of PPPs in Sri Lankan higher education remain subject to debate due to the limited popularity of PPPs in Sri Lankan higher education, which stems from a combination of concerns about quality, historical resistance, socio-political factors, financial issues, and regulatory challenges. Although public-private partnerships generate a powerful tool for solutions to difficult problems by leveraging the strengths of two partners, PPP also addresses the challenges of the changes in the processes (WHO, 1999). The primary aim of this paper is to assess how public-private partnerships can help address the challenges facing higher education in Sri Lanka by examining the concept, the role, and global trends related to public-private partnerships in the context of higher education.

Methodology

This paper used a secondary research approach to make a critical analysis of the Public Private Partnership in higher education with special reference to Sri Lanka. The study has done a comprehensive thematic study on

existing literature, including academic journals, books, government reports, publications of non-governmental reports, and international publications. The theme of PPP was first reviewed for the correct positioning of the study under the most appropriate definition. Subsequently, the theoretical framework was created by using the existing literature. Then, the global trends that are visible from the existing literature were summarized with certain case studies. Next, the review of the prospects and challenges was extended based on the identified prospects and challenges to connect them to the Sri Lankan context.

Discussion

Public-Private Partnerships in Higher Education

PPPs are a contractual agreement between the public and private sectors to provide a product or service to its nation (Bennett, 1991). Partnerships help to improve the infrastructure to deliver quality services as well as enable the public sector to benefit from efficiencies and innovations, along with the capital, skills, and experiences of the private sector institutions (Naranagoda & Khathibi, 2013).

In his 2005 study, Mabizela highlights a typology of public-private partnerships in higher education, which categorizes them into three main types based on their unique characteristics:

- 1. Service Partnerships:** Here, the private partner provides essential administrative support and infrastructure for distance education students who are enrolled in traditional public institutions. The private partner's main goal is to generate income.
- 2. Tuition Partnerships:** This type involves the private partner institution offering face-to-face tuition, making it a unique category among PPPs.
- 3. Professional Institution Partnerships:** In this case, professional institutes collaborate with both private and public institutions (Warasthe, 2017).

As emphasized by Mann (2015) in his study, the Planning Commission in India introduced four types of PPPs in higher education.

1. Basic infrastructure model: The private sector will invest in infrastructure, while the government will manage operations, and the government will make payments to the private party.
2. Outsourcing Model: Private players should invest in infrastructure and manage operations, while the government would fund specific services.
3. Hybrid /Mix Equity Model: The private player and the government should share investment in infrastructure.
4. Reverse outsourcing: The government invests in infrastructure, and private players operate and manage.

However, understanding the differences between public and private roles in education is crucial for any discussion about PPPs. Most educators, along with many authors in this volume, assume that educational systems are fundamentally public because they serve the public good (Robertson et al., 2012). Although partnerships among different firms are now universal (Gulati, 1998), writing about public/private partnerships in education moves us immediately into the political arena.

Especially in Asia, the notion of public-private partnership is difficult to translate to societies whose cultural and political traditions do not easily accommodate the Western distinctions between the private sector and the state (Moulton and Anheir, 2000). Countries like South Korea, India, and Japan stand out for having strong institutional and regulatory frameworks. In India, while implementing PPPs can be quite challenging, the country is making strides and is a bit ahead of Japan, thanks to a strong political commitment and growing capabilities in this area. The People's Republic of China (PRC) also performed well with a mammoth 614 PPPs between 2000 and 2009, despite a relatively underdeveloped institutional and regulatory environment (Mann, 2015).

Theoretical Frameworks on PPPs in Higher Education

Multiple theoretical constructions provide the foundation for researching Public-Private Partnerships in education. According to the **public choice theory**, public service delivery becomes more efficient through PPPs because

market-driven approaches encourage innovation and enhanced performance. Market-based approaches receive criticism because they allegedly put profit above access to equity(Leiringer, 2006).

As per the **Principal-Agent Theory**, public institutions function as principals while private partners are agents, so the essential elements become scheduled contracts, along with accountability features and incentive alignment systems(Danielsson and Uthemann, 2023). The main obstacle in higher education lies in ensuring that private entities maintain their educational targets instead of generating monetary revenue.

The institutions develop partnerships according to **Resource Dependency Theory** as a method to gain access to essential resources. State educational institutions obtain economic support from PPPs to conduct research, along with operational funding and physical infrastructure. However, institutional independence declines as their reliance on private entities grows too heavy.

Global Trends in PPPs for Higher Education

Worldwide, nations implement various PPP models to upgrade their higher education systems. The United States, the United Kingdom, and other developed nations, through their PPPs, direct their efforts toward building infrastructure, conducting research, and providing student support services. For instance, the UK's Higher Education Innovation Fund (HEIF) fosters university-industry collaboration(Sathian et al., 2023).

PPPs in developing nations aim to extend educational access and remedy a lack of funding. The governments of India, South Africa, and Brazil use PPPs to build universities and distribute scholarships while upgrading their vocational training programs. Contemporary concerns exist over how these alliances truly promote equity, though they might mainly benefit upper-class academic institutions(Koning, 2018).

Partnership success between public and private entities depends on their regulatory standards, funding systems, and active stakeholder participation. The success of various initiatives differs because they struggle with their governance structure and sustainability and lack proper accountability.

Case Studies on PPPs in Higher Education

United States: University-Industry Collaboration

PPPs for research and innovation have been established in the U.S. for a long time. The historical context of higher education in the U.S. reveals a tradition of public investment and a commitment to broad access, particularly in the mid-20th century (Lieberwitz, 2021). However, increasing financial constraints on state governments and rising tuition costs have fueled the exploration of alternative funding models, leading to the adoption of public-private partnerships as a means to address these challenges. These partnerships manifest in various forms, encompassing infrastructure development, research collaborations, and the provision of educational services (Blandin, 1992). Through its partnership, Stanford University cooperates with Silicon Valley to create technological breakthroughs and new business initiatives. Academic-industrial partnerships support economic development, yet they generate doubts about business control over educational institutions (Khallaf et al, 2022).

India: PPPs for Educational Expansion

The PPPs in the higher education model of India assist universities in their growth and transformation. The Indian Institutes of Technology (IITs) work together with private sector companies to carry out research projects, provide training programs, and secure funding. These initiatives have enhanced education accessibility, yet people persist in facing problems with both affordability and access to services(Medhi et al., 2019).

South Africa: PPPs for Infrastructure Development

South Africa solves its shortage of student accommodation by using PPPs within the Student Housing Infrastructure Programme (SHIP). The enhanced living conditions this program provides face challenges regarding its financial sustainability, while potentially affecting tuition fees(Wild, 2016).

Uzbekistan: PPPs for Education Expansion

Until 2017, the higher education system in Uzbekistan was characterized by limited access. The coverage of the student-age population by the higher education system is about 9%, which is below regional and international standards (Ravshanovich, 2021). As a potential solution, the government gave access to PPPs in Uzbekistan. As of 2021, the number of higher educational institutions is 151, of which 25 are educational institutions created based on joint programs, private, and PPP (Ravshanovich, 2021). As a result, the enrollment of secondary school graduates with higher education has increased from 9% to 29% over the past five years (Ravshanovich, 2021). Yet, Legislation Issues, institutional restrictions, and distrust among the partnerships are seen as challenges in implementing PPPs.

China: PPPs for Industrial partnerships

In China, PPPs in the education sector rely on market mechanisms and governmental support. Individuals, governments, and private businesses finance their administration (Pillay et al., 2013). In the 1996 Vocational Education Act, China emphasizes the link between vocational education and industry (Remington and Yang, 2020). The integration of education and industry is improved by flexibility, shared responsibilities, and vocational training recognition, giving graduates meaningful career prospects (Sajida & Kusumasiri, 2020).

Singapore: PPPs for Student Welfare

The University Town-Warren in the dormitories of Singapore Management University (SMU) and the National University of Singapore (NUS) are education-related PPP initiatives (Kim and Kwa, 2020). The NUS and SMU abandoned this PPP-based initiative to build new student housing and expand government-funded services. “Due to pricing policies and student debt reduction, PPPs were impossible. Social infrastructure PPP failed because of opposition from the public sector and withdrawal pressure. This case demonstrates how regulation and public support can influence the success or failure of PPP initiatives in education” (Sajida & Kusumasiri, 2020).

Role of PPPs in Higher Education

The most critical role of PPPs is bridging resource and infrastructure deficits. PPPs help bridge this deficit by supplementing public funding through private sector investment in the construction and modernization of schools, advanced learning tools, and digital infrastructure (World Bank, 2020).

Access to private funding through PPPs establishes financial sustainability because it decreases the need for government budget allocations, which enables institutions to invest in infrastructure development alongside academic development. Building infrastructure such as universities and research centers, together with residential facilities, becomes possible through private sector support. PPPs also offer teacher training and professional development programs, which provide educators with the ability to deliver high-quality instruction. These partnerships encourage a culture of continuous improvement that raises the general standards of education (Ahmed & Alam, 2025)

The involvement with private firms through partnerships allows universities to maintain curriculum content that matches industry requirements, thus improving employment outcomes. The collaboration between higher education institutions and companies leads to research collaboration that fuels innovation and stimulates overall economic development through technological progress.

Access is still one of the most crucial challenges facing education, with millions of children worldwide unable to access schools due to geographical, economic, or social barriers (Ahmed & Alam, 2025). Even in the Sri Lankan context, accessibility to the state university system and the acute necessity of ensuring equal higher education opportunities for all eligible and qualifying students before they enter the labor market are evident. Sri Lanka's tertiary education enrolment rate is well below regional peers, largely due to a lack of resources in the public education system, coupled with the affordability issues of individual families (ADB, 2024)

PPPs in Higher Education in Sri Lanka: Prospectus and Challenges

Sri Lanka has a history of PPPs from the 1990s, which have resulted in 179 financially closed projects valued at an excess of \$5.3 billion (CEB, 2023). However, in Sri Lankan higher education landscape, the popularity of PPPs

in Higher Education is limited. This limited popularity stems from a combination of concerns about quality, historical resistance, socio-political factors, financial issues, and regulatory challenges. Addressing these issues is crucial for fostering successful and widely accepted partnerships in the sector. The following are examples of PPPs in the Sri Lankan higher education landscape.

Table 01: PPPs in Higher Education in Sri Lanka

Year	Project	Investment
1999	Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT) was established as a company limited by guarantee.	A loan of SLRs373 million, seed funding, and land contribution from the Mahapola Trust Fund (MTF) (ADB,2024).
2008	The Sri Lanka Institute of Nanotechnology (SLINTEC)	GOSL provided 50 acres of land and an initial investment of SLRs 250 million (for 50% of the stake), with five private partners investing SLRs 40 million each for a 10% stake per partner (ADB,2024).
2011	The National School of Business Management (NSBM)	The project received a concessionary lease from the GOSL for a 25-acre plot of land to develop the university complex, and a concessionary bank loan of SLRs 10 billion from state-owned Bank of Ceylon (ADB, 2024).
2013	The University of Central Lancashire received a 120-acre plot of land from BOI at the Mirigama Export Processing Zone to establish a branch campus of the university	The Project did not progress due to public resistance
NA	The Faculty of Graduate Studies of the University of Colombo	conducts some academic programmes in partnership with a private sector IT service provider as an online programme.
2006	The University of Moratuwa	Partnered with an IT service provider in delivering an external degree (Bachelor of Information Technology).

Source: Authors' Compilation and ADB, 2024

Interestingly, there has been no foreign sponsor participation in education PPPs in Sri Lanka.

While PPPs in higher education are not popular in Sri Lanka, the sector is still struggling with some serious challenges. These include a limited ability to accommodate qualified students and a lack of government funding (Weeramunda, 2008). As a result, the rise of fee-charging higher education institutions, some of which are linked to foreign universities, has emerged. These institutions aim to meet the growing demand for higher education, particularly from those who can't get into state universities or are looking for international degrees (Somaratna, 2020). Public-private partnerships could be a promising solution to these issues, providing a way to broaden access, enhance quality, and make higher education more relevant in Sri Lanka, all while easing the financial strain on the government (Halai, 2015). However, the growth of private higher education institutions has sparked its fair share of debate (Jayawardena, 2017).

Public-private partnerships in higher education are collaborative efforts between government bodies and private organizations, all working towards common goals in the educational landscape. These partnerships can take many forms, such as developing infrastructure, designing curricula, collaborating on research, and delivering educational programs (Panigrahi, 2018).

In the Sri Lankan context, PPPs in higher education could involve private sector investment in upgrading facilities at state universities. Even though Sri Lanka has tried to engage in a variety of PPP initiatives during the 1990s, the results have been less than acceptable (Kandawinna et al,2022). As the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2014) stated, the construction projects in the higher education sector of Sri Lanka have faced many challenges in the long term, such as the cost of construction, the cost of the transaction, and maintenance. As a result, state

universities have become increasingly dependent on government funding (Kandawinna et al., 2022). One major concern is public resistance, which stems from a lack of awareness regarding PPP initiatives. Kandawinna et al. (2022) highlight that improving communication and fostering a cultural shift in the perception of both public and private sectors in education could help strengthen PPP initiatives in Sri Lanka.

In addition, PPPs offer joint programs between state and private institutions, or private sector involvement in developing new degree programs aligned with industry needs. Such collaborations can leverage the strengths of both sectors, combining the public sector's commitment to social equity and access with the private sector's efficiency, innovation, and responsiveness to market demands.

PPPs can foster collaboration between higher education institutions and the private sector, leading to a more dynamic and innovative learning environment, as stated in the editorial content. By bringing together the expertise and resources of both sectors, PPPs can facilitate the development of cutting-edge research programs, the creation of new academic programs aligned with industry needs, and the transfer of knowledge and technology from universities to the marketplace.

PPPs have the potential to address perceived inequalities in higher education by expanding access to educational opportunities for underserved populations. For instance, PPPs can be structured to provide scholarships, grants, and other forms of financial aid to students from low-income backgrounds (Jayawardena, 2017). These partnerships can also facilitate the development of targeted programs and initiatives to support students from underrepresented groups, such as first-generation college students and students with disabilities. However, successful collaboration requires a shared understanding of goals, a clear governance structure, and a commitment to transparency and accountability.

Moreover, PPPs can promote greater diversity and inclusion within higher education institutions by encouraging private sector partners to invest in programs that support the recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and staff. PPPs can also help expand educational access by engaging with the private sector, reducing the financial risk of expanding into new markets, and encouraging growth within the non-state education sector (“Public-Private Partnerships in Education,” 2006).

The commodification of higher education, driven by market forces, can marginalize students from low-income backgrounds, particularly in rural areas, thereby exacerbating educational inequality (Jayawardena, 2017). Therefore, PPPs must be carefully designed and implemented to ensure that they promote equitable access to quality education for all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background (Jayawardena, 2017).

PPPs can play a significant role in fostering innovation and responsiveness within higher education institutions. These partnerships can encourage the development of new programs and initiatives that are aligned with the evolving needs of the labor market, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in their careers. PPPs encourage the development of new programs and initiatives that align with the evolving needs of the labor market, ensuring graduates have the necessary skills and knowledge (Hansen & Lehmann, 2006).

PPPs can also facilitate the adoption of new technologies and pedagogical approaches, enhancing the quality of teaching and learning.

PPPs can also facilitate the development of joint ventures and collaborative research projects that bring together the expertise of academic and industry professionals, leading to breakthroughs in science, technology, and other fields. Furthermore, these collaborations can promote a culture of entrepreneurship and innovation within higher education institutions, encouraging students and faculty to develop new products, services, and businesses that address societal challenges and drive economic growth (Ferroni & Castle, 2011).

Further, PPPs can provide students with valuable opportunities for internships, apprenticeships, and other forms of experiential learning, preparing them for successful careers in their chosen fields. A successful PPP in higher education requires a clear delivery of goals, a well-defined governance structure, and a commitment to transparency and accountability for both partners.

Despite the potential benefits, PPPs in higher education also pose several challenges that need to be carefully addressed. One primary concern revolves around the potential for aggravating inequalities in access to higher education. However, it is crucial to ensure that PPPs do not aggravate existing inequalities by creating a two-tiered system of higher education, where private institutions cater to the wealthy while public institutions struggle to meet the needs of the less privileged (Davis & Hentschke, 2006).

If private sector involvement leads to increased tuition fees or a focus on programs that cater to affluent students, it could disadvantage students from low-income backgrounds, further widening the gap between the privileged and the disadvantaged. Especially, the commodification of higher education is a greater threat than the public perceives. Therefore, PPPs, for some observers, are simply a newer, friendlier face on a longer-standing 'privatization of education' agenda (Hatcher 2006). This is one of the primary reasons behind public resistance to PPPs in higher education in Sri Lanka.

Ensuring that PPPs do not compromise equity requires careful regulatory oversight and the implementation of mechanisms to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, such as scholarships, subsidized loans, and targeted outreach programs.

Concerns about quality assurance also threaten large PPPs, particularly if private providers prioritize profit over academic rigor. Maintaining quality standards in PPPs requires healthy regulatory frameworks, accreditation processes, and mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the performance of private providers (ADB, 2024). In addition, it is also important to ensure that PPPs do not lead to the exploitation of academic staff or the erosion of academic freedom.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Public-Private Partnerships hold considerable promise for advancing higher education in Sri Lanka, offering avenues to augment accessibility, elevate quality, and enhance relevance while easing the financial strain on the government. However, to effectively harness the potential of PPPs and mitigate the inherent risks, a comprehensive and well-defined regulatory framework is essential. In addition, the prioritization of academic values and the public interest is essential to ensuring that these partnerships genuinely serve the needs of students and contribute to the betterment of society as a whole.

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