Comparing Choices in Higher Education
2012 LIRNE*asia* Directory of Undergraduate Degree Programs
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The familiar story that 120,000 students qualify for university but only 20,000 or so gain admission is not true anymore. The first to bust the myth was an education research team at the World Bank. Using census data, in 2005 they reported that 11% of the eligible population in Sri Lanka enroll in tertiary education, with 6% enrolling in courses outside the public university and the formal technical education sector. In India or anywhere else in the world, this 6% would be studying at private or non-profit universities or colleges that operate with the blessing of higher education authorities in those countries.

Fortunately, the situation has changed for the better. During the last few decades a range of higher education opportunities have emerged in response to the demand from parents and students, who are used to paying for private education anyway, as fees for private tuition in the senior grades at schools.

According to the LIRNE*asia* Survey of Undergraduate degree Programs in Sri Lanka the higher education landscape in 2011 consists of at least 46 private institutions and 10 public institutions or programs that recruit students outside of the UGC-mediated admission system, in addition to the 17 public institutions for which admissions are mediated by the UGC.

Private Inputs v. Private Investments

Private inputs or investments in higher education have become an imperative for developing countries who are struggling to meet the demand for better primary and secondary education opportunities for children. Private inputs are contributions made by students through student fees. Private investments can be in the form of private for-fee institutions established by entrepreneurs or non-profit institutions established by philanthropists. In 1997, Chinese government allowed their public universities to charge fees to cover 25% of operating costs. As a result, university enrollments in China tripled from 6.1 million to 19 million in the 6 years spanning 1997-2003.

Neighboring India and Bangladesh too have introduced regulatory frameworks that encourage private investments. India has always had a system of private colleges affiliated with public universities. While many of these colleges receive government subsidies, student-fees cover some of all of operational costs. Stand alone private universities were few in India until 2003. Subsequent to the enactment of an Act in 2003 for the 'Establishment of and Maintenance of Standards in Private Universities', 107 private universities have been established in India, bringing the percent of private universities to 14%. Similarly, in Bangladesh, since the enactment of the private higher education act in

1992, the percent of private institutions has risen to 62% of the total. Medical colleges in Chittagong, for example, now attract a sizeable Sri Lank student population.

What is noteworthy about policies in these countries is their astuteness in combining public and private investments to increase overall access to higher education. In almost all countries, including the USA, financial support and oversight for public institutions are provided by the state but the admission process and the overall management is largely determined by the institutions themselves. Typically, about one third of operational expenses are recovered through fees for tuition charged to students and students loans on generous terms are made available to students.

Private institutions in other countries also receive state support directly or indirectly. In India selected private colleges receive government assistance. In Bangladesh the private higher education act stipulates that 10% of placements should be supported by scholarships. In the USA, student loans on generous terms are available to all students whether they attend public or private institutions.

As the economies of developing countries improve, the percent of public or not-for-profit institution is likely to increase. In developed countries such as USA, UK, Europe and USA, the majority of higher enrollments are in public or private non-profit institutions. For example, in the USA the enrollments in tertiary institutions in 2010 were reported to be 19.4 million students with enrollments distributed across the sector as 75% (Public), 20% (Private, Non-profit) and 5% (Private, For-profit).

Unfortunately, Sri Lanka is stuck in a mode where, the term public university has come to mean not only public ownership, but centrally controlled admission and a tuition-free education. Since the establishment of the first university in 1921, today the public university system consists of 14 universities. Despite the large number of students who are turned away from university admission each year, to the state alone cannot expand higher education opportunities to match the demand. Improving existing public institutions should be a priority for the state. let alone provide adequate facilities for the existing public institutions.

Survey to map private investments in higher education

A myriad of alternative opportunities have emerged in the last decades, giving solace to school-leavers and their parents from all walks of life. The purpose of the 2012 LIRNE*asia* Directory of Undergraduate Degree Programs in Sri Lanka is to fully map the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka in order to better inform parents and students about alternatives to the University Grants Commission mediated higher education system.

LIRNE*asia* is a policy and regulation think tank based in Colombo and active across Asia. The survey of degree programs in Sri Lanka is the first in the series of surveys on further education opportunities in Asia to be carried out by LIRNE*asia*.

Our survey revealed two types of alternatives to the public university system – PRIVATE Institutions and 'PUBLIC-NON-UGC' institutions (or public institutions that are outside the

purview of the UGC). Advertisements and other sources accessed during October 2011 revealed the presence of 46 private institutions and 10 public-non-UGC institutions. Of the private institutions, all 46 responded, some giving more details than others. Of the total, 29 had track records, i.e. they were able to produce one or more graduates in 2010/2011; 15 had students currently enrolled; and 2 are to start programs in 2012. Of the 10 'public-non-UGC' institutions, that included the National Institute of business Management, Open University and Ocean University, 9 had track records of awarding degrees.

All in all, the current higher education system in Sri Lanka comprises of 17 public institutions under the purview of the UGC and 56 institutions that makeup the alternative system, and produced 19,566 graduates in 2010/2011. The alternative system accounted for 36% of that output with private institutions accounting for 14% and public-non-UGC institutions accounting for 22%.

258 Alternative Degree Programs Covering 50+ Specializations

The directory details only the degree programs offered by the alternative system. There are 258 such programs and they are organized by four major fields of study – i.e. COMMERCE, COMPUTER SCIENCE/IT, ENGINEERING and OTHER, and 54 sub-fields or specializations. For each specialization, the name of the degree program, the length of study including foreign components if any, name of the degree-awarding body, track record and cost information are presented. The costs of the listed programs can range from under Rs: 200,000 to over in million for tuition and fees for the full program. The quality of the programs per se is not addressed in this directory. Given the emergent nature of the alternative higher education system, the recognition of the degree-awarding body by relevant authorities and the track record of having graduated one or more students are considered as adequate 'starter' indicators of quality. As the system matures additional indicators of quality will be added.

For further information about the LIRNEasia survey visit www.LIRNEasia.net/projects/HCR. The directory can be found on www.SL2COLLEGE.org as well.