Need for a Ranking of Higher Education Programs in Sri Lanka

Sujata N. Gamage, educationforum.lk and lirneasia.net

in Student Times Magazine, Sri Lanka, 2005

For school leavers in Sri Lanka, the choices in higher education are no longer limited to the 13,000 or so available places in the public university system. If you are able to pay, there are many other opportunities to pursue a degree or a professional or vocational qualification. Should one try one more time to gain admission to a public sector university? Are the public sector programs really free? What is the cost of lost-time? How do the quality, relevance and the true cost of other opportunities compare?

An effective system of regulation in combination with ranking give can the consumers of education the information they need to answer these questions. Regulation by a government or government recognized body ensures that those educational institutions provide the learner with at least the minimum standards.

Rankings allow potential students and their parent to compare and contrast all available opportunities using information collected, collated and analyzed by a third party such as a reputable newspaper. If regulation gives a pass or fail grade, a ranking gives a number score. If regulation is a cake, ranking is the icing.

In this article, Dr. Sujata Gamage, former Director General of the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, argues that in Sri Lanka and other developing countries, the icing may have to come before the cake.

Diplomas and Certificates

In Sri Lanka, the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (**TVEC**) is mandated by legislation to register and monitor all tertiary educational institutions, except those that come under the purview of the University Grants Commission, The Law College, Teacher Training Colleges, and a few other specified institutions. Two-year degree programs or associate degree programs are also under the purview of TVEC although such degrees are not popular in Sri Lanka.

Currently, over 1000 institutions that offer diploma or certificate programs are registered with TVEC. Many more remain unregistered. TVEC has adopted the wise policy of using a market approach to regulation. In a market approach, a list of registered institutes and the programs offered by them would be readily available to the consumers allowing the consumer to make informed decisions. The expectation is that student interest in seeking out registered institute would would compel all institutions to register.

The market principle will work only if the consumers get reliable and timely data that are

made available in a manner that is convenient to the consumer. So far TVEC has not been able to deliver in this regard. TVEC's web site (www.tvec.gov.lk) does not contain any information on registered institutes or about the availability of the directory in printed form. A link to a prospectus of government training institutions for 2002 is displayed but there are no data.

Meanwhile the demand for training continues to increase and the supply is increasing to meet the demand. A government agency that is already behind will not be able to keep up.

Degree Programs

The University Grants Commission (UGC) is responsible for maintaining quality in the degree granting sector. The term 'University' is essentially owned by the government of Sri Lanka, since a university can be only created by an act of parliament. An independent institution may be authorized to offer degree programs but can not call itself a university.

UGC is a latecomer to the business of quality assurance. IN 2002, the Committee on Quality Assurance, a committee appointed by the UGC, initiated a project to design and implement a quality assurance system for higher education. Review of all institutions is expected to be completed by 2005 and the review of individual degree programs is expected to be completed by 2007. This time table does not include private degree programs. The efficiency and the effectiveness of process is not encouraging.

Reviewers for quality assurance are chosen from among the faculty members from the 13 universities and therein lay the problem. Many of our faculty members in the universities do not have the level of post-graduate training. The situation is particularly acute in social sciences, humanities and management fields. Of those faculty members with adequate post-graduate training, not all keep up to date in their subject matter. Degree program reviewers should themselves meet certain quality standards. If you set the bar too high for a qualifying a reviewer, there won't be sufficient reviewers and the efficiency suffers. If you set the bar too low you lower the validity of the quality assurance.

In addition there is the small-pond problem. Nobody would want to be too hard on another colleague who is in the same small university system The quality assurance process in the higher sector badly needs some sort of external validation.

Transnational Operations

Transnational education is a no mans land, locally here in Sri Lanka or globally around the world. Transnational education is service or a trade where the supplier of education is in one country and the receiver is in another country. According to the GATS (General Trades and Services) convention, transnational educational services or any transnational trade or service can operate in one of four modes. In Mode I, education is provided in

distance mode. Distance education requires a high-degree of self-motivation and discipline and is suited more for more mature learners. Distance mode is yet to establish it self as a viable mode of higher education for young school leavers for whom the acculturation and socialization process of higher education is just as important as the as the educational experience.

In Mode II, the consumer moves across the border to where there is supply. Although reliable statistics are unavailable, the number of alumni associations such Association of Sri Lankan Graduates of Indian universities or alumni associations of specific universities are becoming established is an indicator of the growth of mode II educational services.

In Mode III, the supplier establishes a commercial presence in the consumer's country either by establishing a campus or through a partnership with an affiliate. In Mode III a student can study for a foreign degree in his/her home country. In Sri Lanka, Mode III or a Mixed Mode is most prevalent. In a mixed mode, a student begins his/her study in Mode III and then convert to Mode II by proceeding to a foreign destination to complete the degree

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Some Mode II Transnational Offerings for Degrees in IT in SL, as advertised in Recent Sunday News Papers

Study full-time in Sri Lanka for a foreign degree

Degree-awarding institution	Country	Sri Lankan Affiliate
Curtin University of Technology	Australia	SLIIT
Edith Cowan University	Australia	ACBT
Dr. MGR Deemed University	India	Institute of Computer and Management
University of Sunderland	UK	Londontec International
Stratffordshire University	UK	APIIT
University of London	UK	ASARIM
University of Wales	UK	Imperial Institute
Wigan and Leigh Campus	UK	LBS
Northwood University	USA	ANC
Troy University	USA	Institute of Technological Studies

Study part of the time in Sri Lanka for a Foreign Degree

Board of Study	Country	
Charles Sturt University	Australia	IDM
Monash University	Australia	APPIT
Misc	UK	Institute of Technological Studies
Misc	UK	British College of Applied Studies
Misc	UK?	ICBT
Keele University	UK	Informatics Institute of Technology
London Metropolitan University	UK	
	UK	IDM
Misc		Misc City & Guilds Diploma awarding Institutes
Misc	USA	ACHE

Mode IV is when persons move across borders to provide services in person. A recent advertisement for a transnational IT degree program stressed the fact that their entire faculty is made of Australian nationals.

Regulation and Ranking of Transnational Educational Services

UNESCO, together with the European Union has developed a draft paper that emphasizes the importance of transparency, accountability and academic standards and specifying that transnational arrangements must comply with national legislation in both receiving and sending countries. An international document is in the works. The implementation of these codes of ethics is of course is up to each country.

In the absence of a national regulatory framework or a local ranking system in the receiving countries, rankings that are meant for national consumption in the supplier's country are used as credentials in transnational operations. For example, University of Nottingham's operations in Malaysia cite the ranking of that parent university as the 9th in the Sunday Time Good University League Tables 2004. Curtin University of Technology in Perth Australia is ranked by the Times Higher Education Supplement's World University Rankings 2004 for as 76th from among a group of 200 universities from around the world. Curtin University has a branch campus in Sarawak, Malaysia. A Curtin University degree can be completed also by studying full-time at the Sri Lanka Institute for Information Technology.

When a transnational service is offered by a university which is highly ranked in its home location, chances are that the branch campuses or the affiliates also offer a reasonably good education. Problems arise when a university that claims to be ranked in comprehensive universities category for the Midwest region in the US or some such obscure category offers a degree program in Sri Lanka or when nonexistent universities with non-existing credentials offer their programs here.

The University Grants Commission of India monitors and maintains an up to date list of fake universities. The Ministry of Higher Education in Malaysia maintains a registry of all higher education institutions against which fake universities can be checked. No such service exists in Sri Lanka. Fake universities of inferior quality programs can pose serious problems not only for consumers of education but for employers as well. Even if some students might be happy to have degree in their pockets no matter what quality, it affects the pocketbook of the employer who'll be paying for bachelor's degree that does not exist or a degree that is of inferior quality. How do other countries handle transnational education?

Australia

Australia is a country which is both a transnational education provider and a receiver. In Australia all overseas providers must also be accredited through the Australian processes. The accreditation process considers the following criteria.

- The standing of the provider in its own system
- The comparability of qualifications and learning outcomes with those offered in Australia;
- The adequacy of delivery arrangements, including arrangements for oversight of course delivery by the overseas institution;
- The bona fides of any local agent or provider delivering on behalf of the overseas institution;
- The adequacy of safeguards for students if the provider cease to operate in Australia.

In effect, the government in Australia takes responsibility for protecting its consumers.

Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the Asian countries which welcomes transnational higher education operations. The prime Minister himself recently announced that the government will initiate a ranking system starting with ranking of IT programs. If Malaysia succeeds, it will be perhaps the first country in the world where the government steps into do a regulation and ranking at the same time.

Malaysia's attempt is laudable. The Malaysian government will most likely start the process and then allow a private or non-governmental organization to carry it on, similar to the way the studymalasia.com Web site was initiated and is now maintained.

Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, it is very unlikely that any government organization will be able to give the leadership that is required for a viable regulatory system for tertiary education. The political environment is too unstable and government institutions are weak. As a result, government agencies have failed to provide a viable system of regulation of post-secondary education. If the present instability continues and the political system cannot provide a consistent and coherent vision that is long-term, the agencies will continue to fail.

In Sri Lanka and other countries with similar political environments, newspapers together with Chambers of Commerce and relevant professional associations and private organizations need to play an active role in monitoring and reporting on education and training programs. A ranking exercise on its own may not be viable financially, unless it can pegged to other revenue-generating means such as newpapers or magazine sales or the sale of other education products. Internationals donors too should consider

supporting these efforts initially.

According to Lanka Business Online, Sri Lanka Information Communications Technology Association (SLICTA), has begun work on a survey that aims to assess the demand for and the supply of skills in the IT sector. To assess the supply, they are collecting information on the type of skills taught in about 150 training institutions. The information for individual organizations will not be divulged in the final report and the SLICTA survey does not seem to address any quality issues.

Is Sri Lanka ready for rankings?

University rankings are typically based on criteria such as peer evaluation, student entry qualifications, retention and graduation of student, quality of faculty, and facilities and financial resources specific to each location. Score for each criterion is aggregated to give a final score which then is used rank the institutions. As is the case with any indicator that uses measurable criteria and those only, these rankings should be used as a starting point for assessing other qualitative information.

A peer-review score is an important component of a ranking score. Typically every institution ranked will be asked to rate all the other institutions on a given scal of, say, 1-10. In a small country even if a few scores are affected by personal or competitiveness concerns, that can affect the final outcome significantly.

A properly functioning ranking system requires a relatively mature education system where institutions find it in own their interests to report accurate data and rank others reasonably. In Sri Lanka, transnational operations and local private initiatives in post-secondary education are relatively new. These new organizations may not be particularly open to disclosing information when they are in their teething stages.

Ranking systems in the US or UK have access to a base of reliable data that is maintained and disseminated in a timely manner by other well established surveys. In the UK, the rankings in the Guardian Guide to Universities are compiled from official information published by public agencies. This includes teaching assessment scores from visits by Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) inspectors to departments during the recent 10 years. Other scores are derived from figures published or provided by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) and by higher education funding councils. The official data include data on private institutions as well. In Sri Lanka, we have to be creative and design a simple system that may not be exhaustive in its coverage but captures the essence of a quality program. A survey of relevant employers could be an important component for an education system in a small country. Here the small size may be an advantage. The number of employers in a given trade or occupation in a small country can be large enough for collecting sufficiently valid set of data but small enough so as to be manageable.