

Choices and Second Chances

Private IT Education in Sri Lanka

Private IT education institutes competing successfully with universities to produce IT graduates, shows pilot survey.

A university degree should not be a once in a life-time opportunity limited to those who manage to jump the GCE (A/L) hurdle better than others. Today, education is all about choices and second chances at every stage of one's life. If you miss the A/L hurdle, you should be able to get yourself a diploma while you work and then decide to pursue a degree at your convenience. If you had to stop your education due to financial reasons, marriage, raising young children or whatever reason, you should be able pick up and move on when you are ready.

Our public education system is designed to brand students from a tender age. The branding that begins in year-1 with an admission to a popular school, continues with the success or failure at the Grade-5 scholarship, and then culminates with the size of ones Z-score at the GCE A/L -- a score that is largely a testimony to one's exam taking skills.

It is this branding that makes rookie doctors to get upset if senior nurses get paid more than them. After all, doctors received much higher Z-scores at the GCE A/L than any of the nurses. It is almost as if the Z-score cut-off for university entrance represents a new caste system. If you do not do well at the GCE (A/L) you are a 'low caste' for the rest of your life.

The root of the problem is the lack of alternatives to the public education system. Governments all over the world are increasingly finding it difficult to be the sole provider of education, at the tertiary level, in particular. In response, in most countries, including our Asian neighbors such as Bangladesh and Malaysia, governments are looking to private investments to supplement public education opportunities. In Sri Lanka, succeeding governments seem to have adopted a stealth policy towards private education. They want private investments but are afraid to openly encourage them because of the fear of small but vociferous anti-reform elements.

Notwithstanding government's lethargy, it is now possible to obtain a foreign degree in Sri Lanka thanks to the entrepreneurship of a few individuals and companies. Most of the opportunities are in IT or business. There are also a few private institutions that prepare students for the external Bachelor of Information Technology degree offered by the University of Colombo.

A pilot survey that ranks IT education institutes in Sri Lanka, for the first time, shows that private education establishments are getting noticed by employers for producing quality graduates. By their presence these institutions are offering viable choices and chances for the education seeking public in Sri Lanka. These private IT education institutes are not only competing head on with local universities and government

subsidized institutions such as SLIIT and NIMB but are also churning out degree holders that local companies are waiting to snap up. In fact, the pilot survey shows that some private IT education institutes may be better known and preferred than some universities.

This April, Sri Lanka Education Forum - a local non profit organization - conducted Sri Lanka's first ranking exercise of education institutes, by targeting private and government establishments that offer degree programs in IT.

The purpose of the pilot study was to fine tune a methodology for an annual ranking survey of education and training programs offered in Sri Lanka. Ranking surveys such as Good University Guide of UK and Australia, respectively, and Best Colleges in US report by US News and World Report provide parents and school leavers in those countries with comparative data necessary for making informed choices.

Quality Assurance Agency Survey, 2005

The Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council (QAAC) of Sri Lanka was established in 2003 with the support of World Bank's IRQUE (improving the quality and relevance of undergraduate education) project. The immediate task of QAA was to review all academic departments in the public university system. QAA did, however, survey the private tertiary education and training institutions and compiled a directory of private institutions, but unfortunately, for whatever reason, the document is not available to the public. Even if it was made available, The QAA directory is not a user friendly document.

Education Forum's Ranking Survey, 2006

Typically quality assurance directories published by government agencies are not very user friendly. In developed countries, ranking survey reports such as the Good University Guide of UK or Australia, and the Best Colleges survey by US News and World Report have emerged as responses to the consumers' need for comparative information. Such information includes scores made of input data such as quality of teachers and the quality of the incoming students and some process data such class size. A third category of information used in such rankings is a reputation score received by each institution from its peers. Finally, an algorithm is used to calculate composite score and the score are ordered in descending order to produce a ranking of institutions.

The intent of the Education Forum Survey is to present consumers in Sri Lanka a similar ranking report. Increased awareness in society about tertiary education opportunities available in Sri Lanka and in the education provider community about the importance of making available to accurate and easy to use information are the desired effects. The ultimate objective is to change attitudes in society from a fixation on the exclusivity of free-of-charge education to a freedom of choice in education.

The Forum's pilot survey gave sufficient information to make some judgments about the relative standing of public and private institutions that offer IT degree programs. The pilot ranking exercise was conducted in three phases.

First, we extracted information from the QAAC directory about the track record of private IT degree granting institutions in Sri Lanka. The QAAC survey had captured 43 private institutions. Forum's own newspaper advertisement survey revealed many more institutions. Of these we identified 31 institutions as those that may offer degree programs in IT. The number of IT graduates produced in recent years by each of these institutions, as reported to QAAC was used as a measure of the track record of an institution. Since the QAAC survey gave only the data for graduations in 2004 we used that measure. **Only six out of the 19 private institutions in our survey universe reported graduation data to the QAAC.**

Secondly, we asked potential employers to indicate five IT education establishments from which they would most prefer to recruit degree holders and diploma holders. For the employer survey we targeted 33 of Sri Lanka's leading software exporting companies¹ as potential employers. Seventeen companies responded to the questionnaire that we emailed or faxed in April 2006. The response rate was 52%. We were happy with the response given that the survey had to be conducted in the New Year holiday period in Sri Lanka.

Seventeen out of the 31 institutions were ranked in the top 5 by the employers. If an institution was recognized one or more time we record a 'yes' for the Employer Recognition' of those institutions. We do not report the number of recognitions for any of the institutions and put only an 'na' for other institutions because we want to fine-tune our survey and obtain better response rates before we report the number of recognitions received and rank the institutions accordingly.

However, we feel it is alright to divulge at this point that the University of Moratuwa and University of Colombo received the most number of recognitions, and, more significantly, several private institutions came close to the two established universities.

The third part of the pilot project was a Peer Reputation Survey of private establishments that offer IT degree courses. The Peer Reputation Survey asked a set of 19 private IT education establishments to rate themselves on the quality of study programs on offer. How this was done, was by asking the private organizations to recommend the five best places to study for an IT degree, other than their own establishment. They were also asked to recommend the five best places to follow a higher diploma in IT, as an effective means to a degree in IT. We received responses from 9 institutions for a response rate of

¹ Affno, Asiasoft, Barcode Automation Lanka, Symbol Technologies, David Pieris Information Technologies Ltd (DPIT), Debug Computer Software, E Commerce Technologies, em Prise IT, eSenze Solutions, Euro Center DDC, E-W Information Systems, eWave Corporation, Excel Global, Genesis Software, Hsenid Software, IDM Software International, IFS., Informatics Group of Companies, Interblocks Pvt Ltd, ITABS Lanka, John Keells Computer Services, Just In Time Holdings, Kingslake Engineering Systems, Metatechno Lanka Company (Pvt) Ltd., Microimage (Private) Ltd., Millennium Information Technologies Ltd., OpenArc Management Systems, Softlogic Informations Pvt Ltd, TCC Solutions, The Golden Key Software Co, Virtusa, WaveNET, and Zeelabs,

47%, acceptable given the timing of the survey. We did not ask them to rate public institutions because our focus was on students who are cut-off from the public system.

There are at least six private institutions and two universities with a track record of regularly putting out IT graduates into the labor market and recognized by both employers and peers for quality in education. University of Moratuwa and University of Colombo were not included in the peer survey.

Name (alphabetic within each box)	Reported Graduates	Employer Recognition	Peer Recognition
Asia Pacific Institute of Information Technology (APIIT)	Yes	Yes	Yes
IDM Computer Studies (Pvt) Ltd	Yes	Yes	Yes
Informatics Institute of Technology (IIT)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Institute of Technological Studies (ITS)	Yes	Yes	Yes
Singapore Informatics	Yes	Yes	Yes
Sri Lanka Institute of Information Technology (SLIIT)	Yes	Yes	Yes
University of Moratuwa	Yes	Yes	na
University of Colombo	Yes	Yes	na

Two institutes, Royal Institute and Thesaurus Computer Center reported graduating degree holders but at this point we can not say any thing conclusive about their employer recognition. Royal Institute however was recognized by one or more peer institutions as being in the Top 5. Thesaurus Computer Center is noteworthy for successfully graduating University of Colombo BIT degree holders externally.

Royal Institute	Yes	na	Yes
Thesaurus Computer Center	Yes	na	na

Twenty one other institutions advertised IT degree programmes but they did not report graduation data. Notable among this twenty-one are Australian College of Business & Technology, ICFAI University, Imperial Institute of Higher Education, International College of Business and Technology and National Institute of Business Management that received recognition from peers as institutions they would recommend to a school leaver seeking a degree in IT.

AIMS Educational Services (Pvt) Ltd
American College of Higher Education
Aquinas College of Higher Studies
Australian College of Business & Technology (ACBT)
British College of Applied Studies
Business Management School (BMS)
ESOFT Computer Studies (Pvt) Ltd.
Genovate (Pvt) Ltd
ICFAI University
Imperial Institute of Higher Education

International College of Business & Technology (ICBT)
Londontec International
National Institute of Business Management (NIBM)
NIIT - MMBL Cyber Skills (Pvt) Ltd
Open Arc International Scholar Institute (Pvt.) Ltd
Spectrum Institute of Science and Technology (Pvt) Ltd.
University of Jaffna
University of Kelaniya
University of Peradeniya
University of Sabaragamuwa
University of Sri Jayawardenapura

Key:

- Track Record = Graduated 10 or more degree holders in 2004, according the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council's survey of 2005.
- Employer Recognition = Recognized by one or more IT employers as being in the list of top 5 institutions.
- na = not available or not able to report decisively whether not recognized or not
- * = Not included in the Peer Recognition Survey.
- ** = Recognized by one or more peer institutions as being in the Top 5

Public v. Private

In this study we define private institutions as those admitting students outside of the University Grant Commission's admission process and are charging tuition. According to this definition both SLIIT and NIBM are identified as private institutions. The software exporting companies ranked the Universities of Moratuwa and Colombo in the number one and number two positions but one private institute ranked very close to the two universities and ranked above SLIIT or NIBM.

Several other institutions that did not report a track record to the QAA were also ranked among the best 5 by employers and peers. Even a few recently established organizations, that have only just started graduating students, were noted for programs of good standard.

This is a very useful finding of the survey. According to the Higher Education Act, only an institution established by an Act of parliament can call itself a university. But once established there is very little follow-up on the quality of programs offered. To rectify these shortcomings, the recently established QAA is conducting quality assurance of academic programs. However, the pace of accreditation is slow. This, combined with the slow pace at which government agencies publish information, means that students and parents may not receive this information on time.

The results of the Forum's rankings, combined with other information such as time-to-degree (at public institutions, in particular) and other performance data, may convince parents to take a second look at private education options - particularly if some universities are more closed than open and a general degree takes more than 3 years to complete.

Recognition by Peers or Employers

When peers name a list top 5 institutions they may be looking at attributes differently from the employers. Quality assurance by the degree awarding foreign institutions, qualifications of staff and facilities may be considered more important by education providers while the track record of producing graduates and the performance of the graduates in the work place considered more by employers.

However, employers and provider institutions were in general agreement about quality of the 13 institutions that were recognized by both providers and employers, except for the institution marked by an arrow. (If there was perfect agreement all points would lie on the line drawn diagonally at 45° . The institution marked by an arrow received a score of 11 from the xx employers who responded but only an equivalent of 5.5 from the peer providers. The Forum would be conducting in depth interviews with the providers and the employers to further understand the reasons underlying the difference between provider and employer responses.

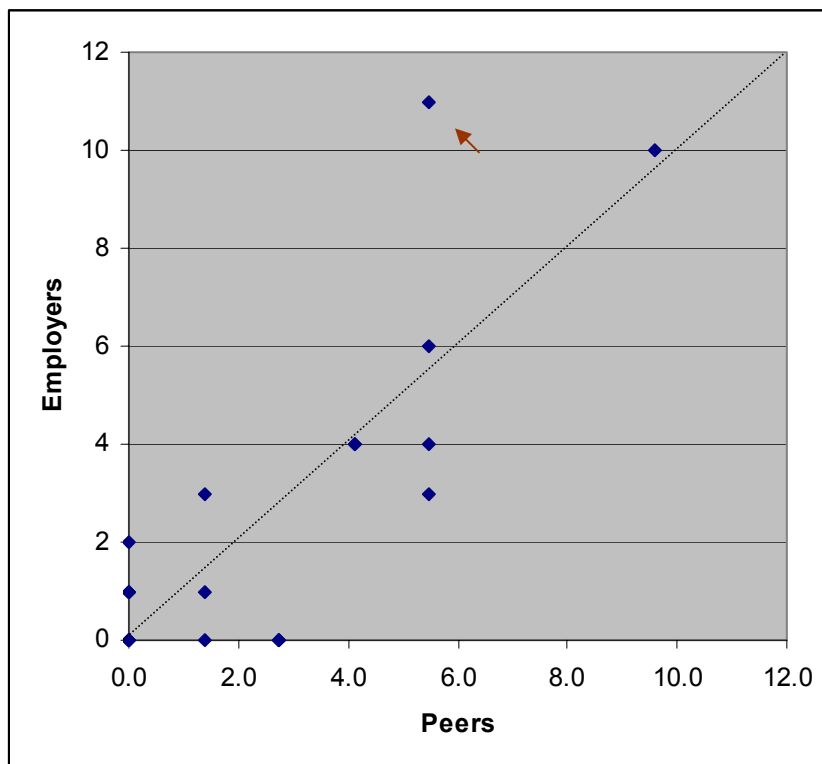


Figure 1. Employer recognition Scores v. Peer-Recognition Scores for 13 institutions

Cost of a Full-time Degree for Students with A/L

Cost comparisons show that Sri Lankan tertiary education sector offer choices in private degree opportunities that fit all sizes of pockets, ranging from as low as Rs: 72,000 to Rs: 1,000,000 for a degree program followed full-time after passing the GCE (A/L).

Mature Programs

The first set of 5 programs in the list, are offered by IIT, APIIT, SLIIT, Royal Institute and IDM, respectively. They reported graduating 102-333 students in 2004 showing a certain level of maturity in those programs. Costs of these programs vary widely.

Judging by the employer responses, the disparity in costs may be justified because we found a certain level of correlation between the cost of program and employers ranking of those programs. With time we hope to be able to improve the survey methodology and provide consumers with more definitive quality assessments.

Emerging Programs

The next set of four programs, offered by ITS, SI, IDM and SLIIT, respectively, graduated 30-60 student in 2004. These programs may signal the next level of growth in IT degree opportunities in Sri Lanka.

External Degree Preparatory Programs

The last two programs represent University of Colombo's external BIT degree preparatory programs. These may not offer a comprehensive undergraduate experience but may suit the needs of those who need degree credentials but not the full experience.

Table: Cost of a an IT Degree pursued Full-Time by a GCE (A/L) qualified Student¹

Name of Institution ²	Length of Study ³	Board of Study	Graduates per Year	Tuition, Rs	Fees Rs	Total Cost ⁴
IIT	4 years*	Manchester Metropolitan U <i>UK</i>	120	1,000,000	na	1,000,000+
APIIT	3-years	Staffordshire U <i>UK</i>	102	660,000	78,000	738,000+
IDM	3 years	London Metropolitan U <i>UK</i>	102	328,000	198,000	526,000+
SLIIT	4 years*	SLIIT** <i>Sri Lanka</i>	333	360,000	na	360,000+
Royal Institute	3 years	University of London <i>UK</i>	145	285,000	na	285,000+
ITS	4 years*	Troy U <i>USA</i>	30	715,000	na	715,000+
Singapore Informatics	3 years	U of Portsmouth <i>UK</i>	17	575,000	43,200	618,200+
IDM	3 years	Charles Stuart U <i>Australia</i>	16	408,000	374,400	782,400+
SLIIT	3 years	Curtin U of Technology <i>Western Australia</i>	56	270,000	160,000	430,000+
IDM	3 years	U of Colombo <i>Sri Lanka</i>	16	87,000	500	87,500+

Thesaurus Computing	3 years	U of Colombo <i>Sri Lanka</i>	14	72,000	na	72,000+
---------------------	---------	----------------------------------	----	--------	----	---------

Key:

U = University; GCE= General Certificate of Education; A/L = Advance Level; O/L = Ordinary Level

* = May include internship period; ** = Receives a public subsidy

Notes:

1. Calculated using data from the Private Higher Education Institutes Survey (2004), Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council, Colombo, Sri Lanka. Credits for Math and English at the GCE (O/L)
2. Costs are reported only for private institutions that submitted degree completion information to the Quality Assurance and Accreditation Council in 2005. Private institutions are those that admit students outside of the University Grants Commission's national admission process. According to this definition, SLIIT is considered a private institution although that institution is housed in well-equipped public facilities and possibly supported through public funds in some of their operations.
3. A year is typically equivalent to 2 semesters and a semester is a period of 4 months.
4. Fees do not include VAT. The costs are as reported in data collected by the QAA in 2005. They are presented here for rough comparisons. Potential students should make inquiries from each provider institution.

When will we you know more

The pilot survey gave the Forum some information that can be shared with the public, but, more importantly, it gave us ideas for improving the survey. During the course of this year we will hold discussions with degree program providers and employers to refine the survey further and conduct a successful survey next year in order to release the rankings with full details in time for the use by school leavers.