**Accountability and Openness**

**Keys to higher education reforms in Sri Lanka**

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Abstract

The public sector is the first choice in higher education for the average family in Sri Lanka. Private higher education is growing, but it will not make a dent in the demand for higher education by these families. Besides being free-of-charge, the public higher education sphere offers a zone of comfort and familiarity for the average Sri Lankan youth. Quality of education provided is assumed but not ascertained and reforms seemingly difficult.

The classic narrative that explains resistance to reform is the “iron triangle” (Gordon, 1981) where politicians, bureaucrats and constituencies find themselves locked into mutually reinforcing relationships that stymie reforms. In the present university setting, students, faculty and administrators and politicians form the corners of a dysfunctional triangle, either comfortable with the status quo, or uncomfortable with change. Politicians, in particular, seem unwilling to spend the political capital needed for lasting reforms.

Based on global trends in higher education reforms, this paper presents several management tools for ‘breaking the iron triangle’ through requirements of accountability for (1) learning by students (2) quality of teaching by faculty (3) academic program performance by administrators, and (4) an open data policy by the government. These four measures are presented as pivotal reforms that can be implemented even without overarching legislative or institutional reforms in higher education in Sri Lanka.

# Introduction

The Public higher education system in Sri Lanka offers a free-of-charge higher education to those who meet a stipulated threshold achievement level at the GCE A/L examination or the Sri Lanka General Certificate of Education, Advanced Level (UGC, 2015). Hence it is only natural that the public higher education system is the preferred option for the average family in Sri Lanka. Currently the system serves about 4% of the 20-24 age cohort in the country (MOSD, 2014), but the popularity of tuition classes that prepare students for the qualifying examination and expenditure for such borne by parents from all income groups (Pallegedara, 2011) shows that the influence of public universities spread beyond its borders. Private higher education is growing (LIRNEAsia, 2012), but the sustainability of these institutions is yet to be seen.

Currently, Sri Lanka does not have mechanisms for assessing quality of the higher education institutions, public or private. Quality assurance processes that are being implemented in the public sector are a step in the right direction but the purpose of quality assurance processes is to assure minimum acceptable standards (Mckay and Kember, 1999). Quality assurance processes have to be supplemented by both internal and external evaluation of performance. Such evaluations are critical for public higher education institutions in Sri Lanka because they account for a substantial public investment and embody the higher education hopes of youth and their families. In the absence of official evaluations, individual accounts (JUSTA, 2014; Perera, 2005; Wijesuriya, 2010) as well as continuing media reports on student unrest, frequent disturbances leading to closures, the attitude of graduates as demonstrated by their expectations and/or demands that taxpayers owe them a job after graduation have justifiably given the impression that reforms are badly needed, but not happening in public higher education in Sri Lanka.

The classic narrative that explains the non-occurrence of reforms is the “iron triangle” (Gordon, 1981). In an iron-triangle situation, politicians, bureaucrats and interest groups are locked into mutually reinforcing relationships that stymie reforms, in opposition to the interests of consumers, citizens or the country. Even if one group in the triad wants to effect change, one of the other two or both will negate it. In another scenario, all three will corroborate with each other, knowingly or unknowingly, to maintain the status quo.

The ‘Iron Triangle’ concept has been applied to education both in its original sense (West, et al., 2012) and from a management perspective (Daniels et al., 2009). Applying the concept in its original sense to education in Sri Lanka, the faculty, students and the politicians form the three corners of a dysfunctional triangle in higher education. University students have secured free-of-charge education after a competitive examination and they would be happy to do the minimum to get their credentials and get out. Student leaders have incentives for perpetuating student struggles as they prime for political careers outside. Politicians find it hard to spend their political capital on reforms that don’t bring immediate benefits to a broader group. When it comes to faculty, some would take advantage of a dysfunctional situation to benefit personally, some struggle against all odds to change the system, and the majority would find it easier to live and let live. The interests of employers who require a workforce for 21st century and the interests of the country in general are compromised severely, as a result.

Unfortunately, the public discourse on higher education in Sri Lanka seemed to be limited to public v. private ownership of higher education institutions, while the global discourse is about accountability and openness by higher education institutions in the developed world (DOE, USA, 2006), and meeting the increasing demand for higher education in the developing Asia (ADB, 2012).

# Problems of accountability in higher education

Accountability in higher education presents more difficulties than in most other sectors of education including professional education or primary and secondary education. Universities are on the top of credentialing hierarchy. It is particularly so in Arts and Science fields where there are no counter-balancing professional associations outside of the academia that could accredit the programs, as in some of the engineering and other more professional programs. An individual faculty member in Arts or Science may decide the flavor of a course offered, if not its full content; teach the course; and set and grade exams. Some forms of moderating or cross-checking procedures are usually available, but implementation can vary. The decision to award a degree is often made within the confines of a small department. Are the professors doing the right thing? Stinchcombe (1990) captured the dilemma of university administrators in his paper titled “University administration of research space and teaching loads: managers of higher education do not know what their workers are doing”.

In the Western world where universities have had a long history going back to the eleventh century, accountability has been built on reputations established over long periods of time. The first university with a continuous operation to date was established in the eleventh century in Italy in Bologna as the Università di Bologna, and in the UK in the 12th century as the Oxford University. Their main mission was education for priesthood and hence largely founded and funded by the Church. Harvard University, the first university in the United States, was established in the 17th century. Having started with a private donation, Harvard is now well endowed as a private non-profit institution of highest quality. First publicly funded schools in the United States is believed to the University of Georgia, chartered in 1785, but University of North Carolina admitting the first batch of students in 1789. Later a system of public universities across the country was established through the Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862.

Prior to World War II, only a small minority of the US population—most of whom were male and white—continued their education after high school. The initial expansion of American higher education came immediately following World War II, and again after the Korean War, when returning soldiers were offered financial assistance from the federal government under the GI Bill of Rights (Lucas, 1994). Building on the advances made in the 1950s, American higher education showed a period of unprecedented growth—often characterized by the term “massification”—during the decade of the 1960s and through the mid-1970s (Gumport et al., 1997). Increased government funding for universities during 1950s and 60s and a well-established foundation of scholarship enabled the US system to survive under the pressures of this rapid enrollment in higher education (Geiger, 2016).

The evolution of universities in Asia is markedly different. In East Asia, the response of governments to increased demand has been to allow the flourishing of private universities. The first universities in Japan, though founded in 1858, did not fully develop until after the Second World War. Today 77% of universities in Japan, for example, are private universities. As in the other developed countries, almost all of the private universities in Japan are not-for-profit institutions indicating that there exists in East Asia a sufficiently large base of philanthropic or other funding devoted to non-state higher education.

Universities in South Asia were transplanted by British rulers and they have failed to sustain themselves in the face of post-colonial developments, the massification of higher education, in particular. The massification in developing Asia seem to have taken on a different pattern because increasing enrollments could not be matched with increasing resources from government or philanthropists, or better oversight mechanisms. Each country has responded to massificaiton in different ways. In Sri Lanka, we saw our own form of massification when the University of Ceylon, established in Peradeniya in 1942, initiated a second Faculty of Arts in Colombo in the early 1960s to accommodate an expanded batch of new students. Initially the classes were conducted in the old racecourse in Colombo, hence the nickname Ashva Vidyalaya (or horse college) given to the new campus those days.

Bangladesh is an example of better management. That country has managed the massification relatively well with a Private Universities Act enacted in 1992 and amended recently, giving a policy framework for a rapidly emerging private university market. Quality issues are said to abound, but there is a framework to deal with them and move forward. In contrast, Sri Lanka is saddled with barriers unique to the country.

# Barriers to accountability in Sri Lanka

Judging by news reports, op-eds and writings in the blogosphere in the last two decades, the higher education policy discourse seem to be centered on the public v. private or for-free v. for-fee debate obscuring other topics. Student unrest and media events surrounding those too have been about the public-private debate. This preoccupation of one topic over all other is perhaps the biggest barrier to accountability in public higher education in Sri Lanka.

There is world-wide acceptance that basic education for children has to be truly free – i.e. free of charge and open to all. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) spell out decreasing levels of rights from basic to tertiary education as “make primary education compulsory and available free to all, secondary education available and accessible to every child and higher education accessible to all on the basis of capacity.”

As differentiated in these UN Charters, providing a free education for young adults is a different story. Even during the Buddha’s time in the fifth century or before, when students attended education institutions in far off places such as Taxila (in present day Pakistan), the students paid their masters a ‘Guru Dakshin’ or a teacher’s fee at the end of their learning.

It is indeed well established that a higher education for a young adult brings more benefits to the individual than to society (World Bank, 2005), and it is reasonable that they pay part of the cost of their higher education through future earnings or working while they study. In fact, eighty to almost hundred percent of enrollments in US, UK, Canada and Australia are in public institutions, but their students are expected to pay certain part of costs of their education. In public universities in the USA, student fees are expected to cover about 1/3 of the recurrent costs, as a rule of thumb. For example, Ohio State University, a major American public university, estimates the cost of tuition and other fees for an undergraduate education to be about $10,000 per year. The government of UK has set an upper of limit of 9,000 pounds or about 13,000 dollars per year and many institutions charge the full amount. These countries are also experimenting with creative ways to support the needy. In the USA, loans on easy terms are available and community colleges offering diploma or 2-year associate degrees are made more affordable as higher education costs go up.

Private higher education is predominant in Asia to varying levels with South Korea (80.1%), Japan (77.4%), Indonesia (79.9%) and Philippines (60.9%) at the high end, and India (30.7%), Bangladesh (14.4%), Vietnam (10.4%) and Thailand (9.9%) at the lower end in terms of enrolments in private institutions (ADB, 2012). We don’t have good data on how many of these private institutions are administered as for-profit entities in other countries in Asia, but we have data for Sri Lanka, where a small but a diverse group of public fee-levying institutions, private non-profit and for profit institution is in operation. Using the list of degrees recognized by the University Grants commission and LIRNEAsia's own survey of higher education landscape in Sri Lanka we can compile a rough guide as shown here:

An estimate of distribution of institutions in the higher education landscape in Sri Lanka, 2016

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| State institutions, Free-of-charge | 14 |
| State institutions, Fee-levying (charging nominal fees, mostly) | 13 |
| Non-state, Non-profit\* | 3 |
| Non-State, For profit, offering a mix of local and foreign degrees | 5 |
| Non-State, For profit, offering foreign degrees only\* | 46 |
| ALL | 81 |

\*The count of these Non-state institutions is per LIRNEAsia (2012)

Free of charge state institution include 14 state universities. The 13 fee-levying public institutions with the exception of Kotelawala Defence University charge nominal fees. Although non-state non-profit institutions are prescribed as viable alternatives for Sri Lanka, there are only 3 such institutions. Notably, two such existing institutions – Sri Lanka Institute for Information Technology (SLIIT) and National School of Business Management (NSBM) - both were initiated with state funding and established on state land. Aquinas, the third institution, is supported by the Catholic Church of Sri Lanka.

For-profit institutions with authority to offer a select number of local degrees are the Institute of Technological Studies (ITS), KAATSU Highly Advanced Medical Technology Training Centre, Colombo International Nautical & Engineering College (CINEC), Horizon Campus and the South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM). Of these organizations, SAITM receives an undue share of press due to opposition from the powerful government doctors’ unions and students in state medical colleges. The other for-profit institutions are able operate more peacefully perhaps because they offer foreign degrees in non-medical fields.

The argument put forward in the media by students and some faculty in the public university system that for-profit private institutions ‘sell degrees’ is without a foundation. The quality of academic programs in Sri Lanka, whether public or private, or not-for profit or for-profit, is yet to be ascertained. In a trial ranking of IT degree programs using reputational ranking by the Software Developers Association and peer institutions, respectively, LIRNEasia found that a private for-profit institution ranked second, above several state universities (LIRNEAsia, 2006). More such evaluations need to be carried out.

Quality assurance processes have been in place from about 2004 in public universities in Sri Lanka. The initial work was funded by the World Bank. In a small university system such as public university system in Sri Lanka it would be limited in quantity and quality of external examiners available in each subject area. Innovations in teaching require external impetuses and inputs, but public universities are currently not beholden any external league table type mechanisms or other external evaluatioWhile recognizing the importance of adapting some of the accountability and openness mechanisms used in the West it would be useful to comment on the likely constrains of their applicability to Sri Lanka, and methods of resolving such difficulties. It is evident that in the West economic power had been used to provide more facilities and usher in change. Is this possible in the context of our universities? The crucial question to be answered is, given the complexity of the Iron Triangle relationships can the proposed accountability and openness mechanisms concerned with internal reforms alone catalyze change? ♣ The paper does not provide any clue as to the outcome of the test study on student portfolios undertaken at the University of Sri Jayawardenepura. ♣ The paper leaves out the accountability issues relating to university administration. The accountability measures proposed in the paper are primarily aimed at the faculty and students. ♣ It is suggested that a civil society group dedicated to higher education may be formed as an offshoot of the good governance movement to induce change. But a civil society group as defined above, if unmindful of issues relating wider socio-political change, would not be in a position to bring about transformative change. It is therefore necessary that civil society groups look for solutions both ‘within’ and ‘without’ the university systemns. Unless the public university community in Sri Lanka becomes more open to accountability through external scrutiny they will be doing a disservice to the country.

# Some ideas for accountability and openness

Universities in the West have responded to the massification of higher education and its challenges by using their economic power to provide more facilities and imposing accountability and openness on both public and private institutions. We should look at these some of accountability and openness mechanisms and adapt some of those for countries like Sri Lanka.

As the Commission on Future of Higher Education of USA noted:

“We believe that improved accountability is vital to ensuring the success of all the other reforms we propose. Colleges and universities must become more transparent about cost, price, and student success outcomes, and must willingly share this information with students and families. Student achievement, which is inextricably connected to institutional success, must be measured by institutions on a “value added” basis that takes into account students’ academic baseline when assessing their results. (DOE, USA, 2006).”

Jon Cowan and Jim Kessler, of the Washington think tank Third Way, propose the quality of instruction, outcome transparency, and financial aid as the three key criteria for assessing higher education (Cowan and Kessler, 2015). This list is a departure from the familiar trio of “access, quality and relevance” typically used in the context of higher education. Their first two criteria are emphasized by the Commission on Future of Higher Education of USA as well. Cowan and Kessler’s call for universities to bear part of the cost of loan defaults by their graduates, underscores the importance of financial aid and accountability by universities for the government that give this aid.

Overall, the quality criteria that is receiving attention in higher education in the developed world seems to be quality of undergraduate instruction and student success outcomes, return to investment, and openness. In the Sri Lankan context where higher education is offered free to students at tax payer expense, accountability of students is an additional dimension which needs to be addressed.

# Accountability of students

Of the total cohort of 20-24 year-olds in the country in 2010, 4% studied at public universities, 3% pursued vocational training which is seen as a distant second choice by many, 7% paid for their own education at private institutions, 54% worked (mostly for economic reasons) and 32 percent neither studied nor worked (MoSD, 2014). Meanwhile, the state spent Rs: 9 billion, out of a Rs. 16 billion budget allocated to education and training of youth in 2016, on youth attending universities free-of-charge. Students in the public university system clearly owe it to the rest of country and their peers to show value for the money spent on them.

According to the statistics handbooks published by University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, during 2004-2010 period an average of 18,975 students were admitted to the public university system. During the 2008-2014 period, 13,353 students graduated per year for an average four-year graduation rate of 70%. Considering that government of Sri Lanka provides education free-of-charge, beneficiary students should be held accountable for their non-completion and administrators held accountable for institutional reasons for students’ non-completion. University curricula should be designed for lateral entry to vacancies created by students who dropout or fail to progress.

A student tracking system which may start as a student debit card to channel ICT resources to students as proposed by the governing party in its Election Manifesto of 2015 could be a start. The debit card can be gradually elevated to an electronic system to track student enrolment and completion by course unit and monitors students’ progress including the time to degree. Gradually this system can be further expanded to include measures of student learning outcomes such as the growth of the student knowledge, skills and attitudes, tracked through a learning management system (LMS). Our public universities already have in place tests of English and IT competence. Student competency in IT and English at the beginning of university career can be compared with that after completing university. More in-depth student portfolios can be added down the road to give a fuller picture of student performance. The process of developing student portfolios itself would lead to some behavioral changes in both students and faculty because students would be required to produce and upload writing samples etc. on their portfolios. Some universities in USA and UK create special groups within LinkedIn, for example, to track and or showcase their student performance.

Finally, financial accountability can be introduced gradually as is done in Australia with universities receiving more autonomy and a higher education increasingly funded through a government grant scheme which pays tuition subsidies to higher education providers on behalf of students (Kemp & Norton, 2014: Appendix 1).

# Quality of teaching

While serving as a consultant to the University Grants commission during the 2004-2005 period, the writer developed a faculty quality ranking system (Gamage, 2005; UGC, 2005). The key criteria used in the ranking were the nature and level of the faculty member’s post-graduate qualifications, his or her rank at the university, and publications. In retrospect, a major problem with the faculty quality system we developed is the absence of measures of teaching effectiveness. Faculty may have the basic qualifications, hold the rank of associate professor or professor and produce publications, but, are students benefiting from their teaching?

Higher education interest groups are indeed experimenting with indicators that measure quality of instruction. One example is the measure of value addition, where students are evaluated to see what gains they have made in their critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and communication skills as a result of their education. The College Learning Assessment (CLA) instrument developed by the Rand Corporation in partnership with the Council for Aid to Education is a case in point (Klein et al., 2007). As the developers caution, value addition measures require careful design of the data collection instruments and the rigorous analysis of data to correct for other variables that can affect student learning. In other words, value addition measures can be costly.

In 2014, as a consultant to the World Bank funded Higher Education for the Twenty First Century (HETC) project, a team of us tested an alternative method using the English Language Teaching Unit Faculty of Arts in the University of Sri Jayewardenpura as a test case. The use of student portfolios, which can be maintained within a learning management system, as indicators of students’ progress was the underlying concept. Such student portfolios can be assessed for quality at the program level, with faculty members in each department collectively held responsible for a student’s growth or non-growth. Unfortunately, that program had to be discontinued as the World Bank terminated the larger program within which this initiative was based.

# Ranking of academic programs

Systems of national league tables or national rankings have evolved over time in the USA, UK, Canada and Australia. There are different rankings for different types of institutions with typologies varying from country to country (Gamage and Petersen, 2012; USNWR, 2016). In most cases, the rankings are carried out by a third party such as a popular newspaper, but their job is made easier by the availability of data from the education system. For example the league tables of Guardian and or the Times newspapers in the UK use teaching effectiveness scores from National Student Survey (NSS) conducted by the Higher Education Funding Commission of England (HEFCE).

Comparing institutions in a small country such as Sri Lanka is difficult because the 13 public institutions are all at different stages of development, but comparison across programs can be more beneficial because newer universities can focus on their strengths. Tracer studies can be a good start. In 2014, The Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE) carried out its own Graduand Employment Census (MOHE, 2012), but the survey compared institutions or disciplines, but not disciplines by institution. The LIRNEasia survey of 2006 which was discussed previously demonstrates that comparisons across programs or disciplines are viable.

# Open data policy

External ranking surveys or informational surveys cannot function without a reliable supply of institutional data. Popular league tables in UK are compiled using data furnished by the higher education agency HEFCE. In the US, universities have responded to demand from publishers like US News and World Reports to annually make available what is called a Common Data Set for use in ranking surveys.

In Sri Lanka, the proposed Right to Information Act is yet to be enacted. In the meantime universities should adopt their own open data policy. The university grants commission annually publishes a statistical handbook detailing process data such as enrollment and graduation by institution, academic stream and year, but what is needed are data addressing the quality of instruction, and institutional performance measures such as: the number enrolled as a percent of those admitted, retention after one-year, graduation rate, time to degree, and the maintenance of a regular academic calendar. Other data important for availability in the public domain are faculty qualifications and accomplishments, summaries of recruitment processes and hiring summaries.

Another key set of documents that need to be in the public domain is al listing of dissertations approved by the universites for awarding degrees. The national archives already has a portal for posting documents online. It can be updated and all graduating post-graduate students should be required to submit an electronic copy to the librarian at the National Archive and receive a certificate of conformity (meeting the Archives standards for publication) before receiving their post-graduate degrees.

# Initiating the reforms

When an iron triangle is in operation in a public university system, any of the mechanisms discussed here would be slow to develop and evolve. External catalysts are needed.

The World Bank is one such entity. The Bank has been providing much needed funds for the development of the higher education sector since 2003. The first grant aimed at Improving Relevance and Quality of Undergraduate Education (IRQUE) at 55 million US dollars was spent between 2003 and 2007. The second project which is named the Higher Education for the Twenty First Century (HETC) will continues until the end of June 2016 and is estimated to cost 40 million US dollars in total. Through future projects, the World Bank has the ability to make incremental changes building on what they done so far, if the projects are focused on making the universities more accountable and open.

A civil society group dedicated to higher education may be formed as an offshoot of the good governance movement. Faculty, students and administrator desiring change, but trapped within the Iron Triangle’ should support such external initiatives.

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World Bank (2005). Treasures in the Education System in Sri Lanka: Restoring Performance, Expanding The paper should provide a brief but a more coherent account of the evolution of university education in Sri Lanka to place the discussion in context.

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