

Accountability and Openness: Key to higher education reforms in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Public sector is the last resort for 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 public higher education by these families. Besides being free-of-charge, the public higher education sphere offers a comfort zone for the average Sri Lankan youth. The elite-average divide in Sri Lanka is a Grand Canyon of disparity with a globally connected English speaking elite on one side and unconnected Swabhasha majority on the other side. During the decades from 1940 to 1960, the public universities served as places where youth from rural Sri Lanka gaining access to the university were assured of an education that opened doors to the world. Overtime, public universities have receded from this bridging role, and today they seem settled on the unconnected side of the cultural Grand Canyon in Sri Lanka. Reforms for the better seem impossible.

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.

All is not lost. There are proven as well as emerging tools that can be optimized for catalyzing change through accountability and openness. These tools can be used progressively, starting small. This paper presents several such management tools.