

Access, equity and quality in private higher education

Ved Goel

Introduction

Private higher education institutions are those institutions that are fully autonomous, do not receive any grant from the government, have their own campuses and have power to award diplomas and degrees. There are regional variations in the proliferation of private higher education around the globe in general and in the Commonwealth in particular. The reasons for the spread of private education also vary considerably, but include the following:

- Deregulation policies introduced by some governments
- Economic crises, which required a reduction in the fiscal deficit through, among other measures, reduced investment in education
- Government-funded institutions are unable to meet the growing demand for higher education and do not offer the types of courses and programmes required for the economy
- Government-funded institutions are considered inefficient

Private higher education institutions are being established under the guise of 'internationalisation of higher education' and 'transnational trade in higher education' without a full understanding of the objectives of either. The days of higher education being the right of an elite few no longer exist; today, higher education is for the masses. Similarly, the traditional value of higher education being for the 'public good' and therefore to be provided by the state has also undergone a shift; now higher education is for the 'private good' with benefit to the individual and thus the individual must pay.

The private returns from higher education are high for both developed and developing countries (WTO, 2010). An analysis of enrolment in higher education across nations suggests that there is a positive correlation between gross enrolment ratio (GER) in higher education and the per capita gross domestic product (GDP) of nations (Agarwal, 2006).

The models of establishing private higher education institutions and their financing vary considerably. These include government-supported private institutions, which in India are referred to as 'grant-in-aid institutions'. Such institutions are mainly financed by the private sector. Some funds in the form of public subsidies are provided by the government to meet recurrent costs and some capital costs. According to the World Bank (2003), government subsidies to private institutions often come with significant regulations. The question arises whether such institutions are labelled as private or public.

The other types of private education institutions are the 'not-for-profit' universities, like Harvard, Stanford and MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology), which have large endowment funds, and the 'for-profit' institutions, such as the University of Phoenix, in Arizona, USA.

The motivation to establish private higher education institutions also varies considerably – from increasing access to providing competition to public sector institutions so that they can improve their quality to making higher education one of the pillars of the economy. Altbach (2007) has observed that within the last 30 years, the private higher education sector has grown substantially. However, private institutions face tremendous challenges, some of which include issues of quality, equity, governance, faculty recruitment and relevance. This paper will discuss these variants of higher education.

Global expansion of private higher education

Besides the USA, which is the nerve centre of private higher education institutions and includes such world-famous institutions as Harvard, Stanford, Yale and MIT, East Asia has dramatically increased its provision of private education, where as much as 80 per cent of students turn to the private sector for their higher education.

In South Korea, 78 per cent of university students and 96 per cent of professional school students enrol in private institutions, which constitute 85 per cent of the total number of higher education institutions (Kim, 2010). In India, which has the largest education sector in the world, 33 per cent of students in 2001 and 52 per cent in 2006 enrolled in higher education, out of which the enrolment in private higher education was 43 and 63 per cent respectively (Ernst & Young, 2011). A further breakdown of enrolment indicates that 78 per cent of professional enrolment in India is in private institutions, as opposed to only 22 per cent in public institutions (Agarwal, 2006). In Sri Lanka, 12 per cent of students study in private higher education institutions, as opposed to 19 per cent in public universities (Mapatuna, undated). While in Malaysia in 2009, 47.5 per cent of students were studying in public institutions as opposed to 52.5 per cent in private institutions (Tham, 2011).

The growth of private higher education in Malaysia and Bangladesh has been facilitated by the Private Higher Education Institution Act, whereas in India, the growth in private higher education institutions (especially those offering professional



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programmes) has been irrespective of any Act or policy, and stems mainly from the demand for higher education in professional areas.

There are 162 branch campuses of Western universities in Asia and the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf States – a 43 per cent increase in just three years (Abd Aziz, 2012).

In Western Europe, on average, only about 10 per cent of students are enrolled in private institutions, with Germany being at the extreme end by offering free higher education. In the UK, there were just 4,300 students in private institutions in 2009–10; this number more than doubled in just two years, and by 2012, 9,360 students were enrolled in private higher education (Morgan, 2012).

Brazil and Chile have close to 90 per cent of the total number of private institutions, enrolling around 70 per cent of the total student population. In Mexico, the number of private higher education institutions has grown from 146 in 1980 to 1,573 in 2009, an increase of 1,077 per cent, whereas the growth of public sector higher education during the same period was 512 per cent (Gregonutti, 2011).

In Uganda, out of a total of 34 universities 29 are private (Businge 2013), whereas in Nigeria 25 per cent of higher education institutions are private (Ramon-Yusuf).

Demand for higher education is rising globally because people believe that higher education:

- Contributes to social mobility and provides a better rate of return for individuals
- Is central to creating a knowledge economy and society in this era of globalisation
- Is key to providing the ever-changing skills and competencies required to meet the labour market demands for a new kind of workforce

Types of private higher education institutions

There is a great variety in the type of private higher education among Commonwealth countries. In India and Malaysia, for example, foreign higher education institutions have set up branch campuses in collaboration with local partners. In Malaysia, a private institution has been started in the name of a foreign institution by foreign investors without the control and governance of the foreign institution. Many Australian universities have set up their campuses in different Commonwealth countries, such as Malaysia, Mauritius and Singapore. In Bangladesh, an international university has been set up as a joint venture between Bangladesh and the Philippines. In Mauritius, as many as 24 UK universities, nine French institutions, six Indian higher education institutions, and three Australian universities are offering their programmes.

Universitas 21, a company registered in the United Kingdom, has a network of universities in ten countries, including Australia, Canada, India, New Zealand, Singapore and the UK. Navitas is yet another company that has universities in Commonwealth states such as Canada, Kenya, Singapore, Sri Lanka and the UK. There are other companies such as Apollo Global, INTO, Kaplan Inc. and Laureate Education Inc. that have higher education institutions in many countries. A private UK university is collaborating with a

secondary school management studies department in India and offering its management programmes on its campus. The students of that secondary school, therefore, can go on to do their degree programmes in management subjects at the UK university.

Many private universities have been set up under a franchising model, whereby a university agrees to authorise the delivery of its approved courses or programmes by a partner institution abroad, at a cost. Other universities have twinning arrangements with local institutions, whereby, depending on the length of the programme, students can study for a year or two in the home country and then a year or two in the parent university in the foreign country. This way, students are able to obtain their degree/certificate/diploma from the foreign university. Furthermore, some local universities are offering courses that are recognised by foreign institutions, thereby allowing students to transfer credits from these courses to an international university. The students complete their remaining credits in the foreign university and thus receive the degree from the foreign university. These arrangements reduce the time and money a student spends in a foreign country.

The contribution to the access and equity agenda by private institutions

From the picture portrayed in the global expansion of private higher education one can confidently conclude that private institutions have improved access. The bigger question, however, is whether these institutions have improved equity. James (2007) suggests that improved access can contribute to improving equity provided greater educational opportunities offer a fair chance for all. But a closer look reveals that private higher education institutions are usually set up in major cities and towns. Consequently, students from rural areas who lack access to higher education and who need higher education are not served by private education. This is more so for girls and women who find the travel to cities and towns challenging because of poor and limited transport facilities. In addition, most of the private higher education institutions do not provide adequate accommodation for students. And in some cases, the fee for private higher education institutions tends to be much higher than public institutions, and so students from poor families find it difficult to gain admission into these private institutions. What is clear, therefore, is that private higher education has not contributed to the penetration of higher education in areas of need. Furthermore, private higher education has concentrated too much on offering professional programmes, thereby their target audience is very selective.

In countries like India, the government is implementing a policy to improve the social and economic well-being of minority and socially deprived communities by legally reserving places in public education institutions for them to take up. Though private institutions often fail to communicate this initiative, the question is whether private institutions should or should not align themselves to this government policy of reservation.

Similarly, in Malaysia, the implementation of the policy of affirmative action for Bumiputera (indigenous peoples of Malaysia) that favoured their admission to public higher education institutions caused much discontent among non-Bumiputera. The introduction of private institutions is now being used as a means of addressing the grievances of non-Bumiputera (Tham, 2007). While the response of the



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Prof. Valentine A. Alelor, the pioneer Vice-Chancellor of Elizade University, is Nigerian and a Professor of Agricultural Biochemistry and Nutrition. He is a recipient of more than 24 national/international research grants, and has published more than 140 scholarly papers in highly reputable national and international journals.

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Government of Malaysia can be commended for making provision for the education of non-Bumiputera, the question arises as to why there are two different education systems – one for native peoples and another for non-natives. The country's private higher education system is generally more expensive than the public education system.

The student group that is barely recognised, even by public higher education institutions, is that of people with disabilities. In most developing countries, many higher education institutions have either limited or no physical facilities such as ramps, railings and toilets for physically challenged people. Though data on such issues is not available, experience shows that even private higher education institutions are not catering to the needs of disabled learners.

It has been observed that public higher education institutions provide a number of fellowships, bursaries and scholarships to deserving and meritorious students for which funds are available from government agencies. Since the focus of private institutions is self-financing and cost recovery, including profit making, the number of such financial support instruments tends to be limited. In Malaysia, for example, in 2001–09 as many as 61,857 students studying in public institutions were awarded scholarships, whereas the number of students in private institutions who received scholarships was just 2,886 in the same period (Tham, 2011). McCowan (2004) reviewed the growth of private higher education in Brazil and noted that since private higher education institutions charge higher fees, most Brazilian students cannot access private education. He also observed that further inequality is being created by private higher institutions due to the relationship between course costs and the value of the final diploma, concluding that 'equitable access is, therefore, far from being achieved'. It can be argued, therefore, that since private institutions, by nature, are accessible to those who can pay, the responsibility of providing low cost higher education and equal opportunity to students rests with the public institutions.

Quality of education in private higher education institutions

There are a number of factors – such as teaching method, quality of teachers, quality of students, teacher-pupil ratio, curriculum, support structure available to students, learning experiences on offer – which determine the quality of education provided by a higher education institution. Sir John Daniel has defined quality as 'fitness for purpose at minimum cost to society' (Daniel, 2007). However, the ability and effectiveness of a teacher in the classroom are considered to be vital. According to the Council for Education Policy Research and Improvement (CEPRI), the most important factor affecting the quality of education is the quality of the individual teacher in the classroom (CEPRI, 2003).

The quality of higher education in private institutions varies considerably, from such world-class universities as Harvard, Stanford and Yale to others whose main motive is commercial (though they may state otherwise). In recent years, allegations have been made that some private universities are selling certificates, providing easy-to-get degrees, have very low standards of teaching, poor infrastructure and charge high tuition fees (Abu Naser, 2008). Similarly, Mazumdar (2012) has noted that although private universities add capacity to the higher education sector, they fail to provide the quality expected by the stakeholders – the students,



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parents, government and society as a whole. In Bangladesh, for example, despite claims by some private universities, the quality of education remains poor compared to the country's public universities. Similar sentiments have been expressed by Ngosi (cited in Kyama, 2012), Director of Human Resources, Science and Technology at the African Union Commission, who believes that the emergence of private universities in Africa must be subjected to regulation, and that there is a need to avoid multiplication of 'briefcase' universities delivering degrees with no real value. In South Africa, many private colleges of poor quality have been catering to disadvantaged students, taking the little money people had and delivering very little in return (MacGregor, 2008).

A large number of India's private higher education institutions have not been able to maintain standards and, unable to attract students, have been forced to close. In one state alone, 32 professional colleges decided to close (*Times of India*, 28 May 2012). The situation does not stop there. In 2012, as many as 65 business management colleges across India were planning to shut down as there was no longer any profit to be made by offering management courses and so they were opting to use the physical infrastructure for more lucrative ventures (*Times of India*, 19 February 2012). It is predicted that within the next two years about 1,500 of India's nearly 2,400 business schools will close down for different reasons.

In describing the situation of Bangladesh's private universities, Abu Naser (2008) notes that 'only a few private universities are ensuring regional or global levels of standard'. Most are not concerned with quality, and suffer from poor infrastructure facilities, inefficient and inexperienced teaching staff. In Afghanistan, Aziz (2010) notes that private universities 'do not fail students because of the fees they pay, so the students realise this and do not study hard. Their aim is to complete the four-year course and obtain a graduation certificate without studying'.

An audit team of the Higher Education Quality Council of Britain visited its franchised institutions abroad and found that the assurance of quality of some UK programmes was not being delivered (Lee, 1999, quoted in Morley, 2003). A study conducted by the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education by Dittrich and Weck-Hannemann (2010) showed that the level of achieved learning outcomes in private higher education institutions was rather low.

On the basis of these observations it would be unfair to say that all teaching and education being provided in private higher education institutions is not of quality. There are examples of excellent teaching and quality education provision in private institutions that is far superior to that being provided in public institutions, as evidenced by the rate of employment and entrepreneurship of the graduates of private institutions.

The problem associated with low quality of education in some private institutions may be partly due to the quality of the students admitted. One of the most important criteria for admission to private institutions is the ability to pay high fees, and in some cases additional 'development fees' or 'capitation fees' are charged. Yet the ability to pay high fees does not necessarily ensure quality of the learner, or what is sometimes called quality of input. In addition, in most private institutions, teaching staff are only employed to deliver their part of the educational programme without their involvement in programme development, conducting research or keeping up with the academic standards.

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