

Shaping education which will shape our future – A Sri Lankan Perspective

By Manilka W. Leamage

Undergraduate Student

How can your country reform the educational system to give young people the right skills and opportunities to enter the workforce?

1. Introduction

Education can be contrasted to the backbone of any living creature. This is because it is almost impossible to live without some sort of education in the modern competitive society in our world today. The educated society is able to contribute, facilitate and sustain itself throughout time and design a viable future for present generations and future generations, and this makes it important to disperse knowledge learned through generations for continuity of a society. Failure to do this will result in an unequal society, where one sect will be able to exercise control over the other, or even a civilisation that will be plagued by numerous health and wealth problems due to the disparity of the distribution of knowledge. The saying "Reading maketh a man" sums this up quite well, while I believe that it should read as "reading sustains a man"

2. The Sri Lankan Education System

I live in a country where the literacy rate is 92.3%, and the gender based literacy rate is as follows.

Male: 94.8%

Female: 90% (2003 est.)

This literacy rate is the highest in South East Asia and is a tribute to the policy of free education for all Sri Lankan citizens up to the tertiary level and compulsory education up to at least grade 10 (15 Years)

The public school network in Sri Lanka is vast, with about 4.2 million children enrolled in over 9,790 public schools around the country. These schools contain a teaching force about 200,000. The government spends 2.8% of GDP for education amounting to Rs 14 billion. (Approx USD 12.7 Million)

This was established by Mr. C.W.W Kannangara in 1944, and has continued to be the underlying policy of the Sri Lankan Government up to date. The policy of distribution of free uniforms to school going children and the policy of providing a nutritious breakfast to students of underprivileged schools has also been a contribution factor to keep children in schools. Also since text books are distributed free of charge from grade 1-11, there is no such radical financial burden on the students thus providing equal opportunities for all students.

Or so it seems..

3. The Current Situation

Just a glance at last years Ordinary Level results paint a very despairing position. With an estimated 525,000 students sitting for the exam in December 2006, 51% had actually failed. 51% of 525,000 is not a small number as it works out to 267,750. As with the Sri Lanka education system only a pass in the Ordinary Level Exam (O/L) will secure an opportunity to commence into Advanced Level Classes (A/L), and as the statistics for last year show, only 48.7% actually qualified to take the A/L exam, which is pretty shocking.

The education commissioner revealed another startling fact in his post examination report. Approximately 21, 813 candidates had failed to secure a single pass. In other words they had failed in all subjects. This is about Of them about 4128 were from Colombo district, 3,564 from the Central province, 3,404 from the Southern province, 2,668 from the Sabaragamuwa province, 2,277 form the Uva province, 2,056 from the North Central province, 2039 from the North Western province, 773 from the Eastern province and 704 from the Northern Province. (There are nine provinces in Sri Lanka)

I've saved the most intriguing statistic for the end.

- About 258,975 students had sat the English language paper and of them 63. 18 per cent had failed.
- About 259,263 faced the Mathematics paper and of them 57. 37 per cent had failed.
- While 258,948 students sat for the Science paper and of them 51. 65 per cent had failed to secure even a simple pass

525,000 Students, free education, free text books, government support, compulsory education and school facilities provided by the government? Then what's wrong? Something has gone wrong somewhere. Statistics like this are shocking and I'm sure that you will agree with me.

If you analyse the background of the examination, students are supposed to sit for 6 core subjects being Mathematics, Religion, Sinhala/Tamil language, English Language, Social Studies and Science. The other subjects can be chosen as optional modules, while passes must be secured in all six core subjects to gain an entry qualification to the AL exam. The pass mark is generally around 35-40, though it may vary with the island wide result.

Guess what. Out of those 48% students who actually qualify for AL, only about approximately 50% qualify to enter the university. And as the data shows only 17-19% of this 50% actually get the chance to qualify for free education due to the limited number of seats available which hovers around 17,000 as there are only 12 National Universities and 2 Institutes under University Grants Commission (UGC) of Sri Lanka.

4. Youth Unemployment

Moving away from examination data and moving on to employment history, it is common knowledge that the graduate students actually struggle to find jobs, and many of them are unemployed in spite of finishing their under graduate education. This is a common factor in the field of Arts.

I would like to present an extract from a report from the department of Census of Sri Lanka regarding the youth unemployment problem

“Although the unemployment rate is highest for the age group 15-19 years, the real age group, which is worst affected, is the 20-24 year group. This is the age group in which many people enter the Labor Force. Survey results shows that youth spend a longer periods of time on education or vocational, technical, professional or other such training at present than those in the yesteryears. Even the majority of the graduates who come out of the universities are in the age group 25-29 years. This is one of the main reasons for their inability to gain suitable employment, specially in the private sector. Another reason seems to be their knowledge of English. Private sector organizations prefer younger persons with perhaps G.C.E.(A/L) and with a reasonably good knowledge of English. When such persons enter the private sector at a relatively young age, get experience and on the job training for about 6 to 7 years, they are better equipped to run the activities of the private sector organizations, than the graduates without a sufficient knowledge of English, who come out of the Universities at the age of around 27 years and with no work experience. This is an extremely unsatisfactory and unfair situation, because the graduates have spent more than 20 years on education and they were the best students who were able to gain entry to the Universities”

The report goes on to show that the youth unemployment rate in 2002 for the age group 15-19 was about 30.1% while the age group 20-29 has an unemployment rate of 20.1% which is astronomically high considering that the majority of the employable and spirited workforce of any country is within this age band.

5. Reasons for the major employment problems faced by the youth

The youth Unemployment issue in Sri Lanka is a major headache. This is because a significant proportion of the able and skilled workforce which could contribute to the economic conditions of the country is unemployed. It has become a common occurrence to see graduate employees from state universities staging protests in order to obtain jobs. However the jobs they ultimately get may or may not be sufficient to make ends meet, or may not inject the skills that they learned back into the national economy.

- The major deciding factor and limiting factor here remains to be the poor knowledge of the English Language.

It has become unfortunate to a certain degree that English has become a deciding factor to obtain a good job, and this has left many youth, with little or poor knowledge of the International Link language, to lay gawking and wonder what they have to do next.

- Poor skills as students are taught a highly theoretical course

A major issue in the education system remains the fact that practical knowledge is not properly inculcated in the curriculum, with the phrase “Spoon Feeding” being a common issue. Students are not exposed to practical scenarios, or given exposure to them, and that has led to a “parrot” like education system, where everything any anything can be done on paper, but almost nothing can be done in the real world. This has frustrated local employers and it is often seen that graduates from private institutions and foreign universities are given first preference over their local counterparts due to their exposure to current events and practical scenarios, thus leaving their local university peers in the dust.

- High degrees of competitiveness have stifled creativity and talent

With only 17,000 seats available in local universities every year, and the cost of private degrees hitting 6 figure sums, which are both unaffordable and unviable for a majority of the Sri Lankan population, has forced parents to push their children beyond the limits to study and study till they probably get fed up of it. It is a common sight to see overcrowded tuition classes and this has led to a culture where students have to work extremely hard just to keep their grades up in order to remain competitive. This naturally stifles their talent and creativity in favour of a more theory intensive curriculum leaving book focused students. As a result a future entrepreneur, or scientist or even a talented sportsman may be lost in the process.

- Age and experience

A student normally finishes his/her O/L exam at 16-17 years, while they would complete their A/L exam at 19-20 years. So if you add another 3 years of undergraduate education you get an individual who enters the job market at 22-23, without experience. This has made employment extremely tough for these individuals as most job advertisements specify at least one year of experience for a job post at 21-22 years. This has created more problems as freshly recruited graduates immediately find themselves unemployed, and unable to get a job, which then leads to frustration. Most advertisements either specify a minimum basic degree qualification at that age bracket, or look for a class at that! The situation is further complicated by not having educational qualifications. Where are the students without educational qualifications supposed to turn to?

I personally know a Rickshaw driver named Jayantha who lives in my area. He told me one day that he held a BA (Honours) degree in Arts, and he was unable to find a job, and he has been driving rickshaws ever since to support his family. Its a sad story, but it is the reality.

- I’m waiting for the right job

Many qualified students have this attitude. I knew of a young Aeronautical Engineering student who actually waited for 2 years to catch on to his dream job in a foreign country. He was offered a job at a local facility but turned it down anticipating his “Dream Job”. Unfortunately for him, the dream remained a dream and his reluctance to accept his first job nearly cost him his future. This attitude problem, even though justifiable at times as it is an ambition, may not be the right solution and does contribute to higher unemployment ratios and skill deterioration.

- Outdated and redundant skills.

The skills, if any, taught to students may not be up to date and follow ancient curriculums, making the graduates more and more unemployable

- Poor opportunities for uneducated students

The opportunities for uneducated students to get a good job diminish day and day, as a plethora of private degree awarding institutes has mushroomed throughout the country, leading many of my lecturers to say that “in a few years time your basic degree will be an MBA and not a BSc degree”. This will inevitably lead to high unemployment and poor relations and tensions between the educated and uneducated. It also has deprived talented individuals from obtaining their rightful place.

6. What can be done to give them the right skills and opportunities to enter the workforce?

The task of assigning and correcting this unfortunate situation is an intricate one, but not an impossible one. It's just a matter of tweaking the education system to achieve its stipulated objectives in order to give equal opportunities to all citizens

- Create a more student centred Educational system and not a “Parrot based” or “Tuition dependant” system
- Allow students to pursue their relevant field of study without forcing them to study irrelevant subject unless vital.
- Inculcate more practical based theory and more emphasis on student discovery and investigation which will allow them to learn from their own mistakes.
- Give graduates industry based training and opportunities to have job-study programmes within their relevant industries so that practical and theoretical knowledge could be combined
- Reduce the age at which students take OL and AL exams, thus making them younger and allowing for job experience with their curriculums.
- Increase the number of local university seats to accommodate the AL students who pass the exam.
- Create private universities under the state umbrella so that every student will have the opportunity to receive tertiary education
- Encourage OL drop outs or failures to re-sit the exam, or if that is not possible allow them to take part in vocational skill training courses and enhance their knowledge so that they will remain competitive in the job market
- Train teachers to identify skills of students at an early age and lead them on the right part.
- Organize training sessions for teachers to continuously update their knowledge and skills in their relevant industry.
- Have “Job Shadow Day Programmes” like the junior achievement system so that students will be exposed to the corporate world at an early age.

- Improve the standards of English in rural areas and island wide through training teachers, but making a state or race language compulsory to learn, so that cultural roots may not be lost.
- Encourage students to learn all three major languages mainly Sinhala, Tamil and English in order to be able to communicate freely with their peers anywhere around the island, which will minimise conflict and foster understanding and togetherness.
- Have industry professionals regularly speak to students about the changing environment and tell students what they must do in order to update their skills and knowledge. Facilities must be provided for this.
- Text books printed must be of a high quality and standard, providing room for students to be creative, innovative and encourage students to learn on their own, by making class presentations, public speaking, class and club activities, field trips of general interest etc.
- The industries should have regular career fairs to allow students to plan their career path at an early age and tell them about what they need to do in order to succeed.
- Students who fail must not be treated as outcasts but must be cared for and helped to reach new heights in whatever talents they have. This would require dedicated teachers.
- Tuition should be not industrialised but designed to help weak students and not as a fashion trend or a competitive weapon as it eats into free time and stifles creativity of students. The curriculum should be properly covered in the class and students should be encouraged to engage in sports and other such activities for character building, making them confident, capable, healthy, presentable individuals.
- The government should take steps to make sure that all graduates are employed in satisfactory jobs through which graduates can contribute back to their society and feel good about doing it.
- A skills training institute should be established for those who need to update their skills and it should be open to everyone and run by industry professionals.
- Make sure that all employees are fair when recruiting.
- Reduce the lag time between OL and AL so that students don't waste time waiting for months on end for their results.
- Have similar organisations like Junior Achievement allow students interested in business to set up their own company within school and learn how to run a company through it. This should be interactive and well managed by competent individuals who have industry experience and those individuals should be appointed to oversee the progress of the school based companies thus allowing the participants to gain first hand knowledge about how to operate a company and how to work as a team thus giving them interactive and creativity skills at an early age.

- This system should be expanded into other sectors such as IT, Science, Medicine, Sport, where students will be given a chance to run their own hospital (Stimulated), IT firm, bank, and sports club and allowed to make decisions through it. This should be firmly supported by the entire community and the relevant individuals should be there to give advice wherever necessary. This will make the participants more interested and open to learning information, and will help them to decide their careers at a very early age, thus saving time and increasing societal contribution.
- Make IT knowledge compulsory for everyone. The IT penetration in Sri Lanka is very poor, and need to be improved. A step in this direction will unleash potential beyond comprehension

7. Who should take the lead in doing so

It's easy to suggest and even easier to document solutions, But harder to implement. A successful implementation of an interactive and more practical education system will involve commitment and dedication from many individuals such as

- **The President** – Should enforce the policy and make sure that it stays viable and implementable
- **Education Minister** – Should “run the show” and make sure that the educational budget is properly utilized in such a way that its investment will have the highest possible return through its benefits
- **Local Government** – Should make sure that proper facilities are granted to all educational institutes, whether local or private to maintain a constant level of quality and comparable education
- **Industry Professionals** – Should provide input to the educational sectors by sponsoring worthy initiatives and offering their services for events such as career fairs and job shadow days
- **Principals and teachers** – Should ensure that students obtain the maximum benefit from educational reforms and encourage students to “be themselves” and study hard and work hard
- **Parents and adults** – Should encourage children to be what they want to be and not what their parents want to be. They should always encourage them and support them and facilitate them to reach their goals
- **Students** – should make use of given opportunities to be both a valuable asset and a contributor to the society and country which they grew up in, by being attentive, corporative and understanding.

8. Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a country with potential. We have many people who could contribute to their society in an optimal way if they were only given the opportunity. Year after year I have seen students from rural areas coming forward with the most innovative and creative ideas for development projects and ideas. Just imagine if these students were given the opportunity and proper exposure? Poverty is a major issue, and that's why the affluent social masses must help to contribute to education the masses of children who are our future. A free education system will work only if those supplying the service do it with dedication and care, and those subject to it appreciate them for the services rendered. The project I propose is possible, but requires a lot of hard work. But I do firmly believe that it is possible and will greatly change the way Sri Lanka will stand in the new future if properly implemented

Manilka W. Leamage

References

Ordinary Level results

<http://www.lankanewspapers.com/news/2007/5/15099.html>

Student Numbers and University Data

<http://www.studentlanka.com/data>

Sri Lanka Census Report

http://www.statistics.gov.lk/Reports/emp_unemp_in%20sri%20lanka.pdf