

November 14, 2008

Educational Reform and Employment Opportunities in Sri Lanka

Manilka W. Leamage

Article at a glance

- Sri Lanka's education system is inadequate to equip students with practical skills and knowledge.
- Curricula require extensive updating and teachers need better training to help students achieve their academic and professional goals.
- The business community must be better integrated with the education system in order to foster skills needed to succeed in the job market.



This article is a 2007 CIPE International Youth Essay Competition third place winner in the category of educational reform and employment.

To comment on this article, visit CIPE's Development Blog: www.cipe.org/blog.



published by the

Center for International Private Enterprise

an affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce

1155 Fifteenth Street NW • Suite 700 • Washington, DC 20005 • USA

ph: (202) 721-9200 • www.cipe.org • e-mail: cipe@cipe.org

Education is the backbone of any modern, competitive society. Educated society is able to contribute, facilitate, and sustain itself and provide a viable future for its current citizens and the generations to come. That is why it is important to share knowledge accumulated in every society for the common benefit. Failure to do so through an effective education system that creates opportunities for all students will result in an unequal society.

The Sri Lankan Education System

In Sri Lanka, the literacy rate is 92.3 percent, or, by gender, 94.8 percent for males and 90 percent for females (2003 est.). This rate is the highest in South East Asia and is attributed to the policy of compulsory education up to at least grade ten and free education for all Sri Lankan citizens up to the tertiary level. The public school network is vast, with about 4.2 million children enrolled in over 9,790 public schools around the country with a teaching force of about 200,000. The government spends 2.8 percent of GDP on education, including free school uniforms for all enrolled children and free breakfast for students in underprivileged schools, which helps keep them enrolled. Text books are also distributed free of charge from grade 1 through 11, which removes a serious financial burden and helps provide equal opportunities for students. In spite of all these beneficial policies, however, significant problems persist.

Ordinary Level examination (O/L)¹ results paint a very grim picture. With estimated 525,000 students taking the exam in December 2006, 51 percent – or 267,750 students – failed. In Sri Lanka's education system, only passing the O/L exam secures an opportunity to commence Advanced Level (A/L) classes. The fact that only less than half of students qualified to take the A/L exam is 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 every subject. Here are a few other thought-provoking

¹In Sri Lanka, O/L and A/L are country-wide academic examinations; universities make their admission decisions according to the A/L exam scores.

statistics: approximately 63 percent of the children taking the English exam failed; 57 percent failed the mathematics exam; and nearly 52 percent failed science. Out of those who passed their exams, only about 50 percent qualify to enter university; however, only 17-19 percent of these qualified students actually receive free university education due to the limited number of seats available (around 17,000).

Yet even those students lucky enough to graduate from a university in Sri Lanka struggle to find jobs and many of them are unemployed in spite of having higher education. This is a common occurrence in the field of the arts, for instance. The following excerpt from the Department of Census's report highlights 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. (...) The majority of the graduates who come out of the universities are in the age group 25-29 years [with no work experience]. This is one of the main reasons for their inability to gain suitable employment, especially in the private sector.”

The report shows that the youth unemployment rate in 2002 for people aged 15-19 was about 30 percent, while for ages 20-29 it was about 20 percent. This is quite high considering that the majority of the employable workforce of any country is within this age bracket. The report also identifies weak English knowledge as another important reason for high youth unemployment.

Reasons for High Youth Unemployment

Youth unemployment in Sri Lanka is a major problem because a significant proportion of the able and skilled workforce, which could contribute to the economic growth of the country, remains unemployed. It has become common to see graduates from state universities staging protests in order to obtain jobs; however, the jobs they ultimately get may or may not be sufficient to live by, or they may simply not inject

the skills learned by students back into the national economy.

Poor knowledge of the English language. As stated earlier, this is a major reason behind youth unemployment. The fact that English has become a deciding factor in obtaining a good job has left many Sri Lankan youths unable to compete in the global market place and with little prospects for the future.

Poor skills resulting from a highly theoretical course load. Practical knowledge is not properly incorporated into curricula, which are commonly characterized by simple rote learning. Students are not exposed to practical training and what they learn in theory has little applicability in the real world. This frustrates employers who often give graduates from private institutions and foreign universities preference over local graduates of public schools. The skills, if any, taught to students are not up to date and often follow outdated curriculums, making the graduates less employable.

Excessive competitiveness stifling creativity and talent. With only 17,000 seats available in local public universities every year and the cost of private schools unaffordable for the majority of the Sri Lankan population, parents are forced to push their children to study beyond the limits. It is extremely hard just to keep their grades up in order to remain competitive. This stifles talent and creativity in favor of a more theory-intensive learning culture. As a result, future entrepreneurs, scientists, or even athletes may be lost in the process, unable to complete their studies.

Age and experience factors. A student normally finishes his or her O/L exam at the age of 16 or 17, while they would complete their A/L exam at 19 or 20. If you add another 3 years of undergraduate education, you get an individual who enters the job market at 22-23 without any work experience. This has made employment extremely difficult for young graduates as most job openings require at least one year of experience. This creates a problem where new graduates immediately find themselves unemployed and with few career options.

I personally know a rickshaw driver named Jayantha who lives in my area. He told me one day that he held a bachelor's degree in liberal arts (with honors), was unable to find a job, and had been driving rickshaws ever since graduating to support his family. A sad story, but it is the reality of Sri Lanka. Many people like him become "trapped" in survival jobs without opportunities to move up the ladder.

Waiting for the right job. Many qualified students have this attitude. For instance, I knew a young aeronautical engineering student who waited two years for a job in a foreign country. He was offered a job at a local facility but turned it down anticipating his "dream job." Unfortunately, it remained a dream and his reluctance to accept the first offer nearly cost him his future. This attitude, though ambitious, may not be the right one and contributes to higher unemployment ratios and skill deterioration.

Poor opportunities for uneducated students. The opportunities for uneducated youth to get a good job diminish by the day. As the number of private degree-awarding institutions has mushroomed throughout the country, finding a position without a degree is near impossible. This makes many expect that in a few years a basic degree will be an MBA and not a bachelor's degree. It will inevitably lead to high unemployment and tensions between the educated and uneducated, and prevent talented individuals lacking education from obtaining most suitable employment.

What Can Be Done?

Correcting this situation is an intricate task, but not impossible; it is a matter of reforming the education system to achieve its stipulated objectives of providing equal opportunities to all citizens. The reforms should include the following:

- Create a more student-centered education system and allow students to pursue their chosen academic fields without forcing them to study irrelevant subjects.
- Integrate more practical knowledge and emphasis on hands-on learning in the curriculum.

- Enhance the quality of textbooks and make them standardized across the country.
- Make information technology knowledge compulsory for everyone. The information technology penetration in Sri Lanka is very poor and needs to be improved.
- Provide room for students to be creative and encourage them to learn on their own through class projects, after-school activities, field trips, etc. Curriculum should be designed to help weaker students rather than create unhealthy competition that stifles creativity.
- Give graduates industry-based training and opportunities for job-study programs and reduce the age at which students take O/L and A/L exams so that they can gain more job experience.
- Reduce the lag time between taking the exams and receiving results so that students do not have to wait for months to know their scores and to make decisions about their future.
- Increase the number of local university seats to accommodate qualified students and create more private universities under the state umbrella so that every student may have the opportunity to receive tertiary education.
- Encourage drop-outs and those who failed their exams to re-take them, or allow these students to attend vocational skill training courses so that they remain competitive in the job market.
- Train teachers to continuously update their own knowledge and skills and to identify and foster skills of students at an early age.
- Improve the standards of English in rural areas and island-wide and encourage students to learn two other major languages: Sinhala and Tamil, while also making a local language compulsory so that local cultures will not be lost.
- Have industry professionals regularly speak to students at career fairs about the requirements of the changing business environment. A skills training institute, run by industry professionals and open to everyone, should be established for those who need to improve their skills.
- More “Job Shadow Day Programs” and organizations like Junior Achievement² so interested students may be exposed to the corporate world and learn how to run a company.
- Help graduates become employed in satisfactory jobs, through which they can reach personal fulfilment and contribute back to their society. Ensure fair recruiting by employers.

Who Should Take the Lead in Education Reforms?

It is easy to suggest solutions to Sri Lanka’s youth unemployment problem, but harder to implement them. Successful implementation of a better education system involves commitment and dedication from many individuals:

- The President should enforce the new policies and make sure that they remain viable.
- The Education Minister should make sure that the education budget is properly utilized in such a way that the public investment will have the highest possible return.
- Local governments should provide proper facilities to all educational organizations, whether public or private, to maintain a consistently higher level of quality.
- Industry professionals should work together with the education sector by sponsoring initiatives and offering resources 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 should encourage students to realize their full potential.
- Parents and all adults should encourage children to be what they want to be and always support them in their educational and career goals.
- Students should make use of available opportunities in order to become a valuable asset and a contributor to the society.

² <http://www.ja.org/near/members/sri-lanka.shtml>

Conclusion

Sri Lanka is a country with great potential, even though poverty is still a major issue. That is why the whole society must contribute to education of the children who are the country's future. There are many young people able and eager to contribute to the society if only given that opportunity. Possibilities abound if these young people have proper education and exposure to practical training. But the education system will work only if the teachers show dedication and care, students appreciate their work, and potential employers offer career guidance and training opportunities. Reforming Sri Lanka's education system to make it more conducive to developing the culture of entrepreneurship is possible, but requires a lot of hard work. Yet, if properly implemented, a great improvement lies ahead for Sri Lanka through high quality education.

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_percent20sri_percent20lanka.pdf

CIPE's 2007 International Youth Essay Competition asked young people aged 18-30 to share their ideas about citizenship, democratic and market-oriented reform, and youth leadership. Manilka Leanage's essay, which won the third place in the 'Educational Reform and Employment' category, was written in response to the question: How can your country reform the education system to give young people the right skills and opportunities to enter the workforce? To learn more about the essay competition, visit www.cipe.org/essay.

Manilka Leanage is a 21-year-old full-time student, pursuing a career in management at the University of Wales through the Imperial Institute of Higher Education. He is also taking a part-time management accountancy course, and is currently employed as a freelance writer. Manilka's interests lie in writing, which has led him to enter numerous essay competitions, both locally and internationally. While he has won many national competitions in Sri Lanka, the CIPE competition is the first international award that he has won.

The views expressed by the author are their own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Center for International Private Enterprise. The Center for International Private Enterprise grants permission to reprint, translate, and/or publish original articles from its Economic Reform Feature Service provided that (1) proper attribution is given to the original author and to CIPE and (2) CIPE is notified where the article is placed and a copy is provided to CIPE's Washington office.

The Center for International Private Enterprise (CIPE) strengthens democracy around the globe through private enterprise and market-oriented reform. CIPE is one of the four core institutes of the National Endowment for Democracy and a non-profit affiliate of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Since 1983, CIPE has worked with business leaders, policymakers, and journalists to build the civic institutions vital to a democratic society. CIPE's key program areas include anti-corruption, advocacy, business associations, corporate governance, democratic governance, access to information, the informal sector and property rights, and women and youth.