

## Higher Education Opportunities in Sri Lanka

*Karunathilake, I.M.<sup>1</sup>, Edirisinghe, S.<sup>2</sup>, Dias, N.W.G.L.T.L.<sup>1</sup>, Senarathne, S.<sup>3</sup>, Senanayake, S.<sup>3</sup>, Somaratne, G.T.S.V.<sup>1</sup>, Gunawardhane, H.P.M.C.<sup>1</sup>, de Abrew, A.<sup>1</sup>*

Strong human capital development is largely responsible for Sri Lanka's continued resilience as a nation in the face of major economic and political setbacks. Sri Lanka's higher education system has made significant contributions to the growth of human capital. Therefore, the country's higher education strategy should focus on enhancing the system's positive aspects and resolving its problems. Sri Lanka has been providing free education since 1945, at primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Kalugalagedera, and Kaushalya. 2017). The free education system is funded by public funds through taxation. Therefore, provision of free education can be considered a responsibility of the government. In a broad context, free education can be considered an investment where one generation invests in the education of the next generation. It has worked exemplarily well for Sri Lanka and has paid rich dividends in the form of human capital development.

School education is compulsory for children aged 5-16 in Sri Lanka (Vengadeshvaran Sarma, 2018). After completing 9 years of secondary-level education students enter the General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level (GCE O/L) classes, typically two years in duration. At the end of the two years, students face a public examination to become eligible for the GCE A/L (General Certificate of Education Advanced Level) class.

For a student who passes the Ordinary Level examination, there are options to either carry on with secondary school education or get access to vocational training or join the working force. If a student is unable to achieve passes in all mandatory subjects, the student still has the privilege to continue education with Advanced-Level studies in the Arts stream. In addition, they can enter into vocational training centers and technical colleges for certificate-level and diploma courses. In the 2017 GCE O/L examination, 71.03% of school candidates qualified for GCE A/L in 2020. (Department of Examination – Sri Lanka, 2020).

At GCE A/L, students can choose a preferred path in science, maths, commerce, arts or technology streams, based on their performance at GCE O/L. The GCE A/L course consists of two years, at the end of which students are required to face an exam that serves as both a selection test for university admission and an achievement test. In 2020, a total of 251,168 students faced GCE A/L as school candidates, including both first and second attempters. Among them, 165,711 students fulfilled the minimum requirement for entrance to state universities (Department of Examinations - Sri Lanka, 2020).

Sri Lankan higher education institutions are broadly classified into four types

1. Public higher education institutions with limited access
2. Public higher education institutions with open access
3. Private higher education institutions which are non-profit oriented
4. Private higher education institutions which are profit-oriented

<sup>1</sup> Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo

<sup>2</sup> Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of Sri Jayawardenepura

<sup>3</sup> The Organization of Professional Associations of Sri Lanka

*Corresponding author: Dias, N.W.G.L.T.L.*  
Faculty of Medicine, University of Colombo  
diaz94tl.physio@gmail.com



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There is a well-built network of higher education institutes in Sri Lanka, but there's a collective concern regarding resource constraints that limit opportunities for higher education for qualified students. Fourteen (14) public universities belong to limited access public higher education institutions where admission is completely based on the minimum Z-score or a standardized score at the GCE (A/L) examination. These institutes represent a substantial investment of Treasury funds and World Bank loans. Open-access public higher education institutions manage their own admissions but charge a nominal fee from the students. These institutions cater to the demand of the public sector with the support of the University Grants Commission (UGC). It is rare to find a private, non-profit-oriented higher education institution in Sri Lanka, as most are profit-oriented.

The mismatch between the number of students eligible for higher education and the opportunities provided by the state universities creates competition for higher education that may adversely affect the expectations of an average student (Wickramasinghe, 2017). However, a careful review of the opportunities available to students who complete mandatory school education up to Ordinary or Advanced certificate level shows multiple options to continue higher education.

Although 165,711 students achieved the minimum qualification for university entry in 2020, state university facilities were available for only 41,669 students. Additionally, 257,588 students were enrolled to read for external degrees in state universities (University Grants Commission, 2020).

The Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) is a state university established to provide lifelong learning opportunities through Open, Distance, and Flexible Education. It provides higher education opportunities for employed persons who wish to enhance their education and those who were compelled to halt their secondary school education (Open University of Sri Lanka, 2014). In 2020, 35,988 students were recruited to OUSL (University Grants Commission, 2020).

In addition to state universities, there are a number of educational institutes that have obtained approval from the UGC, Sri Lanka to

conduct courses at the tertiary education level. These institutions are funded by either the state sector or the private sector. The following institutes are fully or partly funded by the state and managed with varying levels of independence from the respective government and authorities, but admission criteria are determined independently of the University Grants Commission.

- Ministry of Defence: General Sir John Kotelawala Defence University (KDU)
- Ministry of Education: National Institute of Education
- Ministry of Higher Education/University of Colombo: Institute for Agro-Technology and Rural Sciences; Institute of Human Resource Advancement
- Ministry of Skills Development and Youth Affairs: National Institute of Business Management (NIBM); National School of Business Management, Ocean University of Sri Lanka; University of Vocational Technology,
- Ministry of Social Work: National Institute of Social Development (NISD)
- Department of Surveys: Institute of Surveying and Mapping

These institutes cater to a number of students seeking higher education opportunities. For example, the National Institute of Business Management (NIBM) recruited 7,409 students in the year 2020.

Institutes managed by the private sector under the approval of the UGC play a major role in providing opportunities for students to attend higher education. The Ministry of Higher Education lists 24 non-state universities with degree-granting status on its website.

There are a number of unregistered providers in addition to recognized private institutions. These providers take advantage of a regulatory gap that enables them to operate by looking for affiliations with foreign universities to avoid the time-consuming and expensive recognition procedures mandated by the government. The UGC does not accept the final degrees granted by foreign institutions, however, affiliated institutions are permitted to enter into franchising and validation

agreements to offer degree programs in collaboration with overseas providers. Another pathway for Higher Education includes technical and vocational education and training (TVET). TVET in Sri Lanka is governed by the Ministry of Skills Development and Vocational Training and aims to effectiveness and employability of the population, and to provide education and vocational qualifications for lifelong learning. TVET is slowly gaining greater acceptance, but it is still frequently viewed as less desirable

than attending university. TVET programs are not well received/perceived which results in low student demand. These perceptions include views that training is associated with manual labor and that TVET programs do not provide any upward social and educational mobility (International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, 2018). However, the past ten years have seen a rapid increase in enrollments, with TVET institutes providing 103,136 educational opportunities in 2020 (Table 1).

Table 1: Vocational training institutions and number of opportunities

Institutes	Number of Opportunities
Vocational Training Authority (VTA)	24,703
National Apprentice and Industrial Training Authority (NAITA)	14,207
Department of Technical Education and Training (DTET)	25000
National Youth Service Council (NYSC)	13232
Ceylon German Technical Training Institute (CGTTI)	2415
Sri Lanka Institute of Printing (SLIOP)	512
National Institute of Business Management (NIBM)	7482
National Youth Corps (NYC)	11515
NSBM Green University Town	2834
Ocean University	1236
Total opportunities	103,136

Source: (Ministry of Economic policies & Plan Implementation 2021)

The majority of young people seeking higher education seem to be unaware of further options once they complete secondary school education. Students seek higher education opportunities via informal sources of information. When deciding on their course of higher education, most students consult their parents and other family members (Nanayakkara and Wijesuriya 2007). According to a recent study conducted by Bandara, H.G.K.N. and Nuwan, A.N (2021), revealed that general public awareness on

TVET programmes conducted by both private and state sector institutes is above 60%, but they suggest to widened the methods of advertising on TVET programmes through modern communication methods such as social media to increase the awareness on TVET courses which are given more employment prospects on a local and international level such as agriculture oriented courses, animal husbandry, automobile industry training, etc.

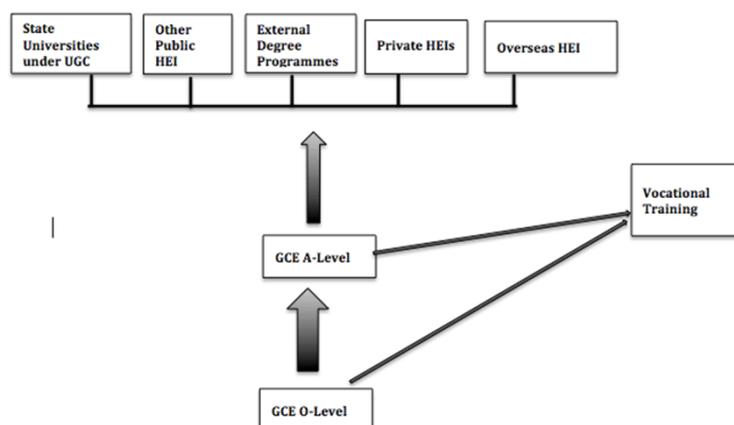


Figure 1: Higher Education Pathways for Sri Lankan Students

It is essential that tertiary education providers focus on marketing their courses while highlighting the direction on employment. Maintaining a career guidance network incorporating schools and all tertiary education providers is a highly recommended strategy to increase awareness of higher education pathways. The state and private sectors should cooperate to develop and sustain this network. (Nanayakkara and Wijesuriya 2007).

## Conclusion

Opportunities for higher education should be based on human resources needs of the country and an evidence-based human resources management policy. Continuous improvement of higher education programmes through quality assurance, accreditation and based on current trends of educational science such as outcome based, competency based education, student-centred learning, integration, use of technology such as online learning and virtual reality.

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