



Pathfinder Economic Flash

Education: Need for Pursuit of Quality

Leadership in a county like Sri Lanka is not just about managing crises but also using them to generate constructive destruction of the status quo and introduce reforms for a creative paradigm shift. The recent strikes by University students and their teachers, agitations for change by other trade unions and Parliamentarians from both sides of the aisle have raised a number of important issues regarding education. Funding for the sector, raising standards and the remuneration of teachers have been some of the key issues that have emerged. This raises the question whether the Sri Lankan education system is geared to produce human resources of the caliber required to serve the ever changing, dynamic landscape of modern Sri Lanka. There is a consensus that the introduction of pro-active reforms in Education is what is required for Sri Lanka today. In realizing the gravity of the situation, the government has declared its intention of appointing a Presidential Commission on Education to study the issues and challenges and make recommendations for necessary reforms.

Sri Lanka's aspirations to transform its economic prospects cannot be met without preparing its young people for today's world. The current system has proven to be a failure in terms of achieving this objective. This places a high premium on reforms at all levels of education (primary, secondary and tertiary) as well as vocational training. This is a problem that has beset the country for a number of years now. The Pathfinder Foundation would like to emphasize that Sri Lanka can no longer be content with a population with only basic literacy or even secondary education. We need to introduce reforms to the education system which provide incentives to produce world class human resources.

The type of approach now required is well exemplified in the recent education reforms introduced in Malaysia. In 2011, Malaysia spent 3.8% of GDP or 16% of total government expenditure on education. This is higher than the developed (OECD) country average of 3.4% of GDP and 8.7% of public spending respectively. Malaysia's education spending also compares favourably with top performers, such as Singapore, Japan and South Korea. Sri Lanka currently spends significantly less of its GDP and public expenditure on education. For example in 1970 we have spent 3.9% of GDP which gradually reduced to 2.57% in 1985 and then picked up to 3.05% in 1998. However, the declining trend continued in 2009 to 2.05% of GDP and the most recent statistic recorded a further decline to 1.9% in 2011. This decline is partly due to heavy

public investment incurred in post-war reconstruction and other infrastructure development areas such as roads, highway, ports (sea and air) and electricity.

Despite their impressive financial commitment to education, the Malaysians have found that: (1) other countries were improving student performance more rapidly and had found ways of sustaining that momentum; and (2) international assessments indicated that Malaysian student performance was declining in absolute terms as well. This highlights the fact that additional money alone is not the answer. Despite its robust financial commitment to education, Malaysia has found itself among the bottom 30% of the countries in terms of learning outcomes.. A comparison of scores showed that 15 year olds in Singapore, Korea, Hong Kong and Shanghai were performing as though they had three years more of education than Malaysians of the same age.

It is against this landscape that the farsighted Malaysian leaders concluded that there was a need for comprehensive reforms to reach the international average in terms of educational attainment by 2020 and reach the top 30% of countries by 2027. Malaysia's new Education Blueprint has been drawn up after consultations involving 50,000 stakeholders. It contains 11 areas of reform:

- Transform teaching and ensure recruits come from only the top 30% of graduates and introduce a peer review led culture of excellence and certification
- Ensure high-performing principals in every school
- Increase access to education while improving quality to match international standards
- Ensure that every child is proficient in Bahasa Malaysia and English
- Develop values driven Malaysians and promote unity among races
- Empower district and state education offices and schools
- Improve ICT in schools, including Wi-Fi access
- Transform the Education Ministry to improve delivery through results-based approaches
- Involve parents, communities and the private sector;
- Ensure students' academic outcomes are proportional to the government's spending on education
- Increase transparency in the Ministry's progress towards the targets set out in the Education Blueprint through annual reports on performance and comprehensive stock-taking in 2015, 2020, and 2025.

Malaysia's Blueprint seeks to produce students with six key attributes: knowledge, cognitive skills, leadership skills, bilingual proficiency, ethics and spirituality, and an inclusive national identity.

These education reforms are to be implemented in three stages over a period of 12 years commencing in 2013. It is, therefore, too early to assess its efficiency and efficacy. However,

there are lessons to be drawn for Sri Lanka regarding the urgent need for a consultative approach to develop a holistic reform program in education, training and skills development. Without a hard-nosed assessment of our strengths and weaknesses in this area and a strategic approach to comprehensive reform, Sri Lanka will inevitably experience ever escalating disadvantages in an increasingly competitive world.

The far-thinking Malaysian leadership and educationists are introducing drastic measures in spite of the fact that Malaysia has become a regional education hub which attracts a large number of students from every part of the world. Unlike Sri Lanka, they have allowed private sector participation in primary, secondary and tertiary education. Many internationally reputed universities are currently operating their branches in Malaysia, serving both local and foreign students. Nevertheless, the new reforms are a necessary condition to maintain the high standard of education needed to attract domestic and foreign high-tech industries and services as well as high value jobs.

Sri Lankan political leaders, educationists and academics need to urgently introduce very fundamental education reforms: (1) Recognise private primary, secondary and tertiary education institutions which are now operating as ‘international schools’ and ‘affiliates of foreign universities’.(2) Improve teacher recruitment standards/procedures and introduce performance-based incentive payments to school teachers, including principals. (3) With government teacher training facilities being fully utilized it may be necessary to encourage Private Public Partnerships (PPPs) in teacher training to accommodate the demand for staff from the private ‘international schools’. The prognosis for any country that has a weak teaching profession can only be bad.

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