

Education and employment in Sri Lanka: A look toward the future

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Since independence, Sri Lanka has made significant allocations of national resources to support and expand the educational system. In turn, there have been major improvements in literacy, community health, adoption of innovation, and general access to education. However, this investment in human capital has yielded mixed results in the effort to develop a labor force well suited for the needs of the Sri Lankan economy.

Youth unemployment and underemployment has long been an issue (Hettige, 2000; Dickens and Lang, 1995; ILO, 1971). Unemployment appears to cross gender and socio-economic lines and to affect both secondary leavers as well as university graduates (Malhotra and DeGraff, 1997; “Sri Lanka: Schools Out of Sync”, 2002). Hettige (2000) notes that urban males are disproportionately unemployed and Dickens and Lang (1995) calculate that the typical unemployment period lasts four years or more.

Although the problem of educated unemployment is complex, analysis suggests that, “The education system generates a mismatch between expectations and employment opportunities” (ILO, 1971, p. 22). This has resulted in efforts to reform the educational system (Wijemanne and Welikala, 1975; “Sri Lanka: Schools Out of Sync”, 2002) and, more recently, to improve the knowledge that youth and their families have about careers, employability, and training options to allow students to make informed and rational vocational choices.

This paper, after reviewing the literature on education and employment, surveying other factors which impinge upon the problem, and examining educational reform efforts, concludes with a series of observations and suggestions regarding future direction: How to improve the relationship between secondary/post-secondary outputs and labor market need; where to target scarce resources available for educational reform; and, how to incorporate lessons and innovations from other contexts globally.

Key words: Education; Employment; Unemployment; General education; Employability; Economics of education