

## SRI LANKA

### Country Summary of Higher Education

#### Background

**Recent expansion of tertiary education:** Enrollments in Higher Education (HE) are not known with precision in Sri Lanka. The only reliable data are those covering public Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The core of the public system is made of 17 public universities catering for about 70,000 students at both under-and post-graduate levels. If only the public universities are taken into account, the enrollment rate in higher education would be at around 3%. Yet, public HEIs also comprise the Open University, and 13 public postgraduate and specialized institutes. Moreover, a total of about 150,000 “external students” must also be accounted for –even though they take exams without attending classes. Finally, about 50 private institutions are also operating and are on the rise. Even though the exact number of students attending the latter is not known, it is estimated that the real enrollment rate –covering students attending all public and private is closer to 18%, and has been increasing rapidly.

**Tertiary Education System:** The University Grant Commission (UGC) is an apex body whose mandate is to allocate resources to the public universities and specialized institutes. Until 2006, higher education matters were under the auspices of a Ministry of Education. In January 2007, a full-fledged Ministry of Higher Education was created, marking a renewed priority for the sector. Admission to universities is organized centrally by the UGC.

**Quality Assurance Mechanisms:** Education in Sri Lanka, at some point the star of the South Asian Region, has not kept up with its reputation. Student assessments show a modest level of quality, and employers’ assessments of graduates’ both cognitive and attitudinal skills are also largely negative. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation (QA) of the UGC has taken bold steps to introduce a culture of accountability in the sector. The QAA is conducting a number of institutional reviews, subject reviews, awareness programs, and is currently completing subject benchmark statements. The QAA does not deal with private HEIs. The move towards an independent accreditation board is currently being discussed.

**Government Strategy:** At the macro level, the “*Mahinda Chintana: Vision for a New Sri Lanka*” is a 10-year Horizon Development Framework (2006- 2016) built around an ambitious 8% to 10% GDP growth rate target. The Framework aims to create a knowledge economy able to sustain global competitiveness, and higher education is one of the privileged channels to achieve this goal. However, there is currently no real long-term higher education strategy. This is why the Government has recently launched the development of such a strategy, using a two-pronged approach combining technical expertise and consultative process.

Table 1 Summary Data on Higher Education (2006)

	Public Sector				Private Sector
	Public Universities (undergraduates + postgraduates)	Higher Education Institutes	Open University	External Students	
Enrollments (total)	71208	12674	23992	150142	45700
Enrollments (Girls)			11941	100232	
Teacher/Student Ratio	20.5	58.7	89.2		
Faculty/non Teaching staff Ratio	2.3	1.9	2.2		

Table 2 HE Expenditures as a share (%)

	2000	2005
HE Expenditures/GDP	0.5	0.5
HE Expenditures/Total Govt Expenditures	1.6	1.8
HE Expenditures/Total Govt Expenditures on Education	15.8	17.3
Total HE spending per student as a % of GDP per capita		84.2

Table 3 Composition of HE Expenditures (2005)

General Administration and staff	16.7%
Academic Services	56.6%
Welfare Services	13.4%
Maintenance Services	7.6%
Others	5.7%

### *Issues*

Access	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rapid expansion of enrollments, mostly outside of the public, formal sector</li> <li>• Extremely limited access to Public Universities, obliging half of eligible secondary school graduates to register as “external students”</li> </ul>
Quality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unsatisfactory level of quality (largely as an heritage of low quality at secondary level)</li> <li>• Despite major breakthrough in quality assurance activities, Sri Lanka lacks an independent Quality Assurance Board</li> </ul>
Relevance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A major problem in Sri Lanka, as evidenced by high level of graduate unemployment</li> <li>• Low level of interaction between academic world and industry</li> </ul>
Financing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• High unit costs, especially in small public universities</li> </ul>
Governance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distribution of responsibilities between MoHE and UGC still unclear</li> <li>• Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation functions are weak</li> </ul>