

Continuing education in Sri Lanka – An overview

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Introduction

After 30 years of secessionist conflict with a minority rebel group, Sri Lanka is aiming at rapid economic development and in this regard, high emphasis is given to science and technology development, development of trade and business as well as to development of higher education. The higher education vision of Sri Lanka is to be an international hub of excellence by 2020 (MOHE 2012). The 2012-2015 midterm plan of the National Higher Education Strategic Management Plan of Sri Lanka has identified 12 goals; the first being increasing the opportunities and access to higher education. One of the objectives listed under this goal is to increase the enrolment through the distance education system (MOHE 2012). Open and distance education is a means of continuing education for many people in Sri Lanka.

Access to higher education provided by State universities, which is entirely free for the students who are enrolled, is extremely competitive and only about 15-16 percent of those who are qualified at the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) examination, which is also the university entrance examination, are admitted due to limitations of space and other facilities (Abeyratne and Lekamge 2012). This is around 20,000. These state universities are funded by the Government from tax revenues. For admission to these universities, merit as well as district criteria and education facilities available in districts are considered. At present, for Science based faculties, only 45 percent are admitted on merit while 55 percent are admitted on district quota. The balance 5 percent are admitted from educationally under-privileged districts. As a result, some of those who perform better in the entrance examination are deprived of free higher education in State universities.

Of those who do not get an opportunity to enter state universities, around 3000 – 4000 enter private higher education institutes which offer degree programmes of foreign universities and around 15000-20000 go to foreign countries to pursue their higher studies (Abeyratne and Lekamge 2012). Many others enroll in the open and distance learning programmes offered by the Open University of Sri Lanka (OUSL) and in several other conventional State universities as external degree students in order to continue their education. Of the total higher education enrolments in Sri Lanka, about 19 percent are in conventional State

universities and around 7 percent are in the OUSL while 58 percent are enrolled in conventional state universities as external degree students (World Bank 2009).

Open and distance learning programmes for continuing education

The external degree students who are enrolled in state universities and those who are enrolled in the OUSL follow open and distance education courses. These programmes facilitate continuing education because the followers are those who did not get an opportunity for conventional higher education. OUSL and several other universities offer open and distance education courses to working adults too.

The main university, which had been established for the sole purpose providing continuing education, is the OUSL. In addition, out of the 14 other conventional State universities, 8 universities namely, the Universities of Colombo, Eastern, Jaffna, Kelaniya, Peradeniya, Ruhuna, Sabaragamuwa and Sri Jayawardene Pura are enrolling students for their external degree programmes. The degree programmes offered are Bachelor of Information Technology, Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Business Administration, Bachelor of Arts and Bachelor of Commerce. The subjects offered include languages such as Chinese, Japanese, Russian, French, German, Hindi, Tamil, Arabic, English, Sinhala, Sanskrit, Pali as well as Buddhist Culture, Christian Culture, Hindu Culture, Islamic Studies, Linguistics, Translation methods, History, Geography, Sociology, Political Science, Economics, Fine arts, Education, Library Science and Science subjects such as Zoology, Botany, Chemistry, Physics and Mathematics.

The National Online Distance Education Service (NODES) of the Ministry of Higher Education also provides opportunities for continuing education. Many State universities including the OUSL, postgraduate institutes and several non-state higher education institutes are partners of NODES. Many training programmes are offered online by NODES through the access centers distributed throughout the country (Figure 1).

Quality Assurance in continuing education programmes

Much attention is paid today for quality assurance in higher education in Sri Lanka. Periodic institution reviews, subject reviews and programme reviews are being conducted in Sri Lankan universities since 2004. A Standing Committee on Quality Assurance has been established at the University Grants Commission to coordinate and regulate quality assurance

activities in State universities. These activities for the past 10 years had been financed by two higher education projects funded by the World Bank.

Recently, a Standing Committee at the Ministry of Higher Education has been established to ensure the quality of higher education offered by the non-state higher education institutions. The non-state higher education institutions have to undergo a rigorous quality assurance review process in order to get the approval of the Ministry of Higher Education.

In the recent past, much attention has been paid to improve the quality of external degree programmes offered by conventional universities. The Higher Education for Twenty First Century (HETC) project of the Ministry of Higher Education, funded by the World Bank has provided financial assistance to enhance the quality of these continuing education programmes. Many shortcomings of these programmes have been identified (World Bank 2009) and action is being taken to rectify those.

A Quality Assurance Toolkit for distance higher education institutes has been developed in the recent past with the participation of Commonwealth of Learning and UNESCO which has been now internationalized to be used as a generic document applicable to all commonwealth countries. In this toolkit, required standards and performance indicators for several criteria both at the institutional level and programme level have been identified. These criteria are as follows (Commonwealth of Learning 2009).

Criterion 1: Vision, mission and planning

Criterion 2: Management, organizational culture, and leadership

Criterion 3: The learners

Criterion 4: Human resource development

Criterion 5: Programme design and development

Criterion 6: Course design and development

Criterion 7: Learner support and progression

Criterion 8: Learner assessment and evaluation

Criterion 9: Learning infrastructure and resources

Criterion 10: Research, consultancy and extension services

This toolkit is very useful in conducting external quality assurance reviews of open and distance education institutes and programmes.

Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework and continuing education

Recently developed Sri Lanka Qualifications Framework (SLQF) identifies the progression pathways for higher education in Sri Lanka (MOHE 2013). This SLQF also helps in continuing education as it identifies the lateral entry pathways in higher education (Figure 2). The pathways identified in the National Vocational Qualifications Framework developed by the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission of Sri Lanka are also incorporated into SLQF and those who miss the formal higher education can go through continuing education programmes including career training, workforce training, formal personal enrichment courses, self-directed and experiential learning and ultimately get higher education qualifications through lateral entry. In other words, the SLQF enables those who are employed in a particular field to get higher education qualifications in their specialized field through accreditation of their career training and prior experiential learning. Although SLQF is now implemented in the Sri Lankan university system by the University Grants Commission, an agency to implement it in the entire higher education sector in Sri Lanka is yet to be established.

Continuing education for China – Sri Lanka business and trade development

Many of the continuing education programmes offered by the OUSL and conventional universities help to disseminate knowledge and train people on subject areas such as Commerce, Economics, Political Science etc. (Mendis *et al.* 2006), which are important for business and trade development between China and Sri Lanka. In this context, it is very important to place in record that University of Kelaniya offers Chinese language also as a subject for continuing education programmes. University of Kelaniya is the only University in Sri Lanka which offers Chinese language in continuing education programmes of open and distance learning leading to external degrees.

The Confucius Institute

Teaching of Chinese language in Sri Lanka was boosted due to the establishment of the Confucius Institute at the University of Kelaniya in 2007. The aims of establishing this institute were a) promoting Chinese language and culture; b) promoting mutual development; and c) enhancing cultural and academic collaboration and exchange between China and Sri Lanka (KIn 2014). Although Chinese language was taught at the University of Kelaniya even before 2007, the establishment of the Confucius Institute helped in getting native speakers as

teachers and promoting education on China and Chinese culture as identified in its mission statement, which is “to provide better awareness on Chinese language and its culture among undergraduates as well as general public”. At present it offers Certificate courses at three levels (Level 1, Level 2 and Level 3), a Diploma course and a general Chinese language course. It has offered more than 30 scholarships to Sri Lankan students to study in Chinese universities. In 2013, 15 students and 3 temporary teachers of the University of Kelaniya who were following courses at the Confucius Institute were awarded scholarships to follow postgraduate courses leading to Masters degrees in three Chinese universities namely, Beijing Language University, Chongqing Normal University and Shenyang Normal University. In 2012 also seven scholarships have been offered to do Masters degrees at the Chongqing Normal University.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Kelaniya offers daytime programmes, evening programmes, weekend programmes and long holidays programmes to university students as well as to primary and secondary school students. It can offer Chinese language courses cooperating with other institutions, both in the state sector and non-state sector. It has planned to establish Chinese language classrooms in schools and train local teachers who teach Chinese language.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Kelaniya also conducts various Chinese cultural activities. It teaches Chinese martial arts free of charge on every Wednesday and organizes Chinese movie shows every weekend. A Chinese corner and a lecture on China and Chinese culture are also held once a month.

The Confucius Institute at the University of Kelaniya can play a significant role in providing continuing education in Chinese language to the employees in the state and non-state sectors, which will significantly contribute to China-Sri Lanka business and trade development.

Conclusion

Higher education plays a significant role in sustainable economic development. At present much emphasis is given in Sri Lanka to develop the higher education sector with the aim of becoming an international hub of excellence in higher education by 2020. Due to extremely high competition of getting admitted to State universities as internal students, large number of students enroll either in the external degree programmes offered by State universities in the open and distance mode or in the Open University of Sri Lanka, as a means of continuing

education. The NODES of the Ministry of Higher education also provide continuing education programmes online. The SLQF allows the consideration of continuing education achieved through career training, workforce training, formal personal enrichment courses, self-directed and experiential learning to get higher education qualifications through lateral entry. The Confucius Institute at the University of Kelaniya can play a significant role in providing continuing education on Chinese language, China and Chinese culture to potential Sri Lankan work force, which is essential for China-Sri Lanka business and trade development.

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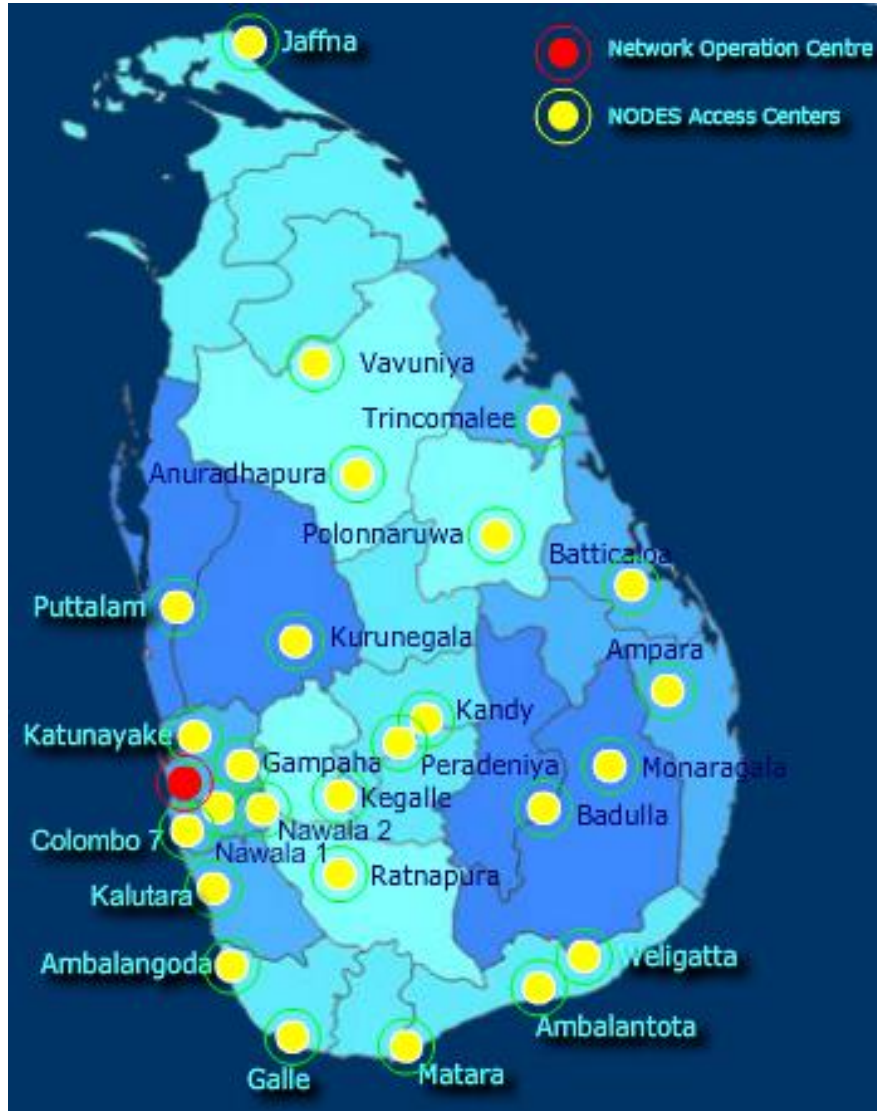


Figure 1: National Online Distance Education Service access centers (Source:

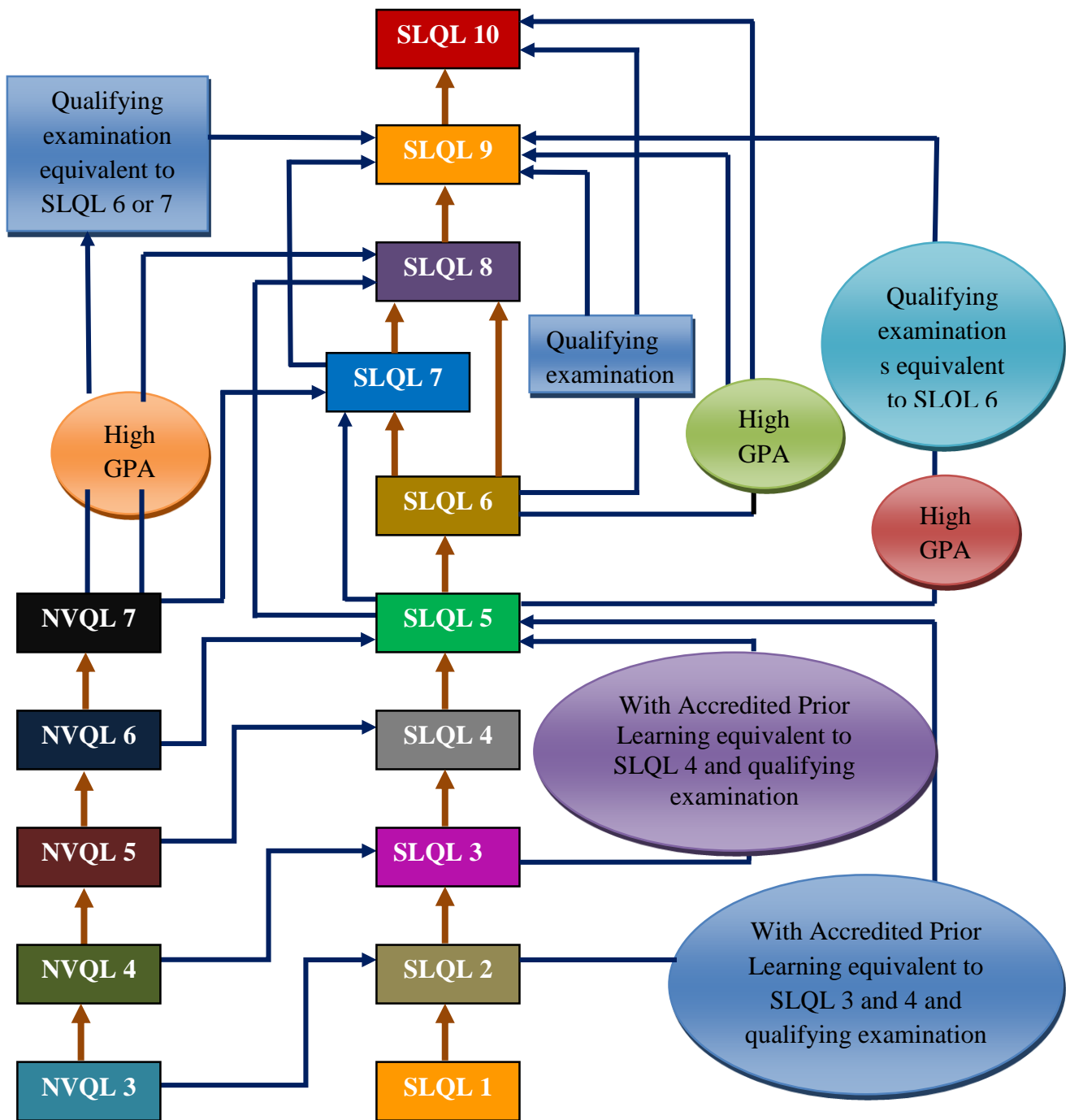


Figure 2: Progression Pathways of Higher education (Source: MOHE 2013)