

Higher Education amid Crisis in Sri Lanka

Raveenthiran Vivekanantharasa and Gerardo Blanco

Even though Sri Lanka is a lower-middle income country, there has been a considerable concern for higher education, along with significant progress, since independence in 1948. The Sri Lankan higher education system comprises 17 government universities, 20 university-affiliated institutes, five other government universities, 11 advanced technological institutes, seven advanced technological institute sections, and 10 private universities and institutes. Sri Lanka allocates a substantial portion of its budget to education. The 2022 budget for education is over LKR 157.6 billion (roughly USD 436 million), a major increase from LKR 126.5 billion in 2020.

The planning activities to improve the higher education system at the national level ended in failure with the most recent economic collapse. Sri Lanka's economy faces acute foreign currency shortage, looming debt repayments, high inflation, and food, fuel, and medicine shortages. These pressures resulted in nation-wide protests and an unstable political system that triggered an economic recession. As a result, universities, colleges of education, technical colleges, advanced technological institutes, and vocational education centers in the country have been affected in unprecedented ways.

Closures of Higher Education Institutions

Sri Lanka temporarily shut down state universities and other higher educational institutions in the capital, Colombo, and other main cities, due to a prevailing fuel crisis and a collapsing economy. Even after the toppling of the president and the prime minister and the installation of a transitional government, the University Grants Commission asked that universities hold in-person activities only three days per week, due to the cost of fuel. These interruptions of academic activities at most universities are adding to the learning losses resulting from the pandemic. Roughly 70 percent of academic activities of all higher education institutions remain online. These closures and the partial reopening have affected enrollments for the new academic year. Students who got through the advanced level examination for entry into higher education are being assigned to different streams than those they had selected.

Since 1945, Sri Lanka has maintained a free education policy. However, due to the economic crisis, access to higher education is limited as a result of either a lack of physical facilities or internet access for online learning. In addition, unprecedented increases in the cost of petrol (33.1 percent) and diesel (64.2 percent) have made transportation unaffordable for most academics and students. The Sri Lankan government stopped foreign import and export transactions to address the crushing trade deficit faced by the country. As a result, institutions face shortages of supplies and equipment for academic activities. For instance, printing paper is being rationed. Students have been badly affected by rising prices of food, medicine, accommodation, and transportation.

Students pursuing higher education through the few private higher educational institutions in the country are facing many challenges with the steep increase of tuition. While the number of Sri Lankan students abroad had swelled in recent years, roughly doubling in the five years leading up to the pandemic and reaching more than 30,000 in 2019, the shortage of foreign currency and the depreciation of the Sri Lankan rupee (by over 30 percent as of April 2022) have also adversely affected those students. These problems threaten some private universities with closure, due to lack of enrollments, and outward mobility will also become unaffordable.

Abstract

The current economic and social crisis in Sri Lanka has caused many challenges in the national higher education system. Despite much effort and investment, all aspects of higher education in the country, including teaching and learning, funding, facilities, and access, have been severely affected, creating significant uncertainty for the future.

In the midst of the severe economic crisis and political instability, wide segments of Sri Lankan society, including teachers and students, took to the streets and ousted the government.

Raveenthiran Vivekanantharasa is lecturer in the Faculty of Education at The Open University of Sri Lanka. Email: rvive@ou.ac.lk.

Gerardo Blanco is associate professor and academic director of the Center for International Higher Education, Boston College, US. Email: blancoge@bc.edu.

Impact of the Crisis on Online Teaching and Learning

After remaining closed for over a year during the COVID-19 pandemic, universities resumed learning activities on a limited scale, contingent on adherence to health guidelines. However, the economic crisis forced all universities, schools, and higher educational institutions to close again and continue their activities online. For a lower-middle-income country, this is a major drawback because students living far away are not capable of accessing online teaching and learning. Poor internet connectivity, unstable power grids, and lack of access to devices are some of the main obstacles. In a country where more than 70 percent of students have no access to the internet or to electronic devices, online study is not a viable solution. Furthermore, due to fuel shortages, networks stopped functioning temporarily and network access was frequently interrupted.

Foreign Aid and an Ongoing Higher Education Crisis

According to UNICEF, more than 5.7 million people in Sri Lanka require humanitarian assistance. While the economic crisis made foreign aid more necessary than ever before, the protests and social unrest that ensued forced the closure of many humanitarian programs. In coordination with the International Monetary Fund and other development partners, the World Bank is advising the government on appropriate policies to restore economic stability, but does not plan to offer new funding to Sri Lanka until an adequate macroeconomic policy framework is in place.

In the midst of the severe economic crisis and political instability, wide segments of Sri Lankan society, including teachers and students, took to the streets and ousted the government. With the selection of a new president and a transitional government, it remains to be seen what steps will be taken to help the country recover from the cascading impacts of the pandemic and the economic crisis. In this new context, private higher education is at risk, along with other segments of the economy, and the outward flow of Sri Lankan students will likely stop, except for those most privileged. New strategies for higher education management will be key to address the root causes of the economic, social, and political crises in the long term. ▲