



RESEARCH MONOGRAPH



**National Examination Systems
in Sri Lanka: Current Practices
and Future Policy Perspectives**

By Dr. Jayantha Balasooriya

BALPP
RESEARCH
WING



RESEARCH THAT INSPIRES

National Examination Systems in Sri Lanka: Current Practices and Future Policy Perspectives

Abstract

Sri Lanka has a long history of predictable and well-established public examination systems. Nonetheless, examinations and assessments are widely debated and sensitive topics in education. Examinations and evaluations are consistent with the curriculum and such systems are used to measure and understand students' learning achievement levels. The country is moving towards changing the prevailing systems including education, and education policy reforms are key to such system changes. Hence, considering the facts related to education curriculum including examination systems, this is the critical time to revisit the prevailing system and propose fresh initiatives in line with the national requirements with a long-term futuristic system visionary on par with the international demands and trends.

The primary purpose of this policy brief is to study the present national examination systems of the school education sector in Sri Lanka and its associated consequential issues and constraints. Under this objective, it analyses critical issues that emerged from existing testing and evaluation practices. Indeed, an association of national trends in education and using international experiences, present policy suggestions for the consideration of future policy formulation in school education.

The study method of this policy brief mainly employed a qualitative approach, including the critical incident technique, and content analysis. Accordingly, a substantial set of primary and secondary data and information was collected by reviewing the literature -both international and context-specific literature- and conducting in-depth direct interviews (IDIs) with experts on the subject.

This policy brief revealed that the current education system in Sri Lanka is heavily examination-oriented and the curriculum is heavily content-oriented. It is visible in the stereo-typed learning, examinations, and tests that are conducted. When studying past education policies, frameworks, and reform initiatives in Sri Lanka, almost all have discussed issues related to existing examination and evaluation systems. Based on such deliberations, options, and alternatives have been proposed, but still, many of them are not implemented, and remedial measures have not taken place in a meaningful way to diminish students' stress and other problematic circumstances.

Examination and evaluation are part of the curriculum. However, in current examinations in Sri Lanka, a single examination is used for different purposes (e.g., (i) the grade five scholarship examination is used for the selection of students belonging to low-income households to grant bursaries and selection of students to be admitted into the popular secondary schools; (ii) the GCE OL examination is used for measuring attainment levels and selection of students to follow GCE AL courses; (iii) GCE AL examination conducted for dual purposes on measuring attainments after school education and selection of students to universities). Almost all education-concerned people are fully aware of the issues and burdens faced due to the existing examination systems. The education system in Sri Lanka is examination-centric and highly competitive; hence, massive arguments are taking place on these examinations.

These examinations have moved from original educational aspects/purposes and given more weight to secondary purposes. Such a situation impacts deviating from the original examination and evaluation framework purposes and evaluation principles and guidelines. Today education involves heavy costs. As a result of artificial competition, education has full-market features and has established the education industry in the country. Consequently, many economic avenues have been created and the tuition industry is one of the most lucrative businesses in Sri Lanka. The coaching is expensive, and poor households cannot afford it. These situations created several issues and constraints that emerged in the dimensions of educational, social, economic, and values segments. As a result, high competition is created in primary and secondary education, and such a situation caused to establishment of sub-systems of education in the country.

Currently, several types of assessment practices in classrooms are used, and most commonly, paper-pencil tests, homework assignments, term tests, assessments of projects, etc. are used. The present education world is swiftly changing and accordingly, the curriculum contents, teaching methodology, delivery mode, teacher role, etc. need to be changed or modified in line with the futuristic labour market requirements. Considering the system requirements, the quality of public examinations needs to be improved, and the assessment skills of teachers need to be built.

Transparency of public examinations needs to be improved in order to build credibility of examinations. Generally, the stress of students on examinations cannot be made zero. Presumably a certain degree of healthy level of stress is required to complete any task.

What we can do is to minimize extrinsic and artificial stress on students. However, the stress of students needs to be as low as possible, and student-friendly examinations and evaluation systems are required to be executed. It is necessary to strengthen the SBA system and to integrate SBA with public examinations in a practical and acceptable manner; transparent and unbiased. Furthermore, it is also necessary to have minimum competence for passing examinations. Co-curricular activities in assessments are needed.

Keywords: *Evaluation, Examination, GCE AL, GCE OL, Grade 5 scholarship examination, Sri Lanka*

1.0 Introduction

The policy of the government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) is to provide free education from the primary to the first-degree level of the state university education. Accordingly, the government has accepted that education is a fundamental right of each citizen, and the Sri Lankan constitution ensures everyone the right to universal access to education at all levels (Balasooriya, et. al., 2010:815). To ensure that every child has access to education, a network of government schools has been established covering the entire country. The government has provided these schools with the necessary human, infrastructure, financial, physical, and in-kind resources. Moreover, students enjoy a package of welfare/subsidy services (i.e., textbooks, school uniforms, scholarships, midday meals, free health services -health insurance, dental treatments, sanitary napkins for girls-, subsidized transport, and required facilities for children with disabilities) provided to ensure equitable access and participation in education (Wehella & Balasooriya, 2014:93; Jayaratne, et. al., 2013).

The period of general (school) education comprises all grades from grade one to thirteen in the school system. Broadly there are two main divisions, primary school covering the first five years and secondary eight years from grades six to thirteen. Sri Lanka is implementing a national curriculum and national examination system. The country has a clear policy on national examinations (Dundar et, al., 2017). National policy directives are given in the Public Examination Act No. 25 of 1968 and designated the Department of Examinations (DoE) as a mandatory body to conduct examinations. The act described the purpose of examinations and their governance, distribution of powers and responsibility, procedures for addressing problems, rules about preparing for examinations, grading and marking methodology, and use of the rules (Government of Ceylon, 1968; Dundar, et. al., 2017).

Accordingly, examination/assessment/evaluation systems are part of the national curriculum, and the national testing and evaluation system is functioning in the system. DoE is the entrusted institution to conduct national-level examinations, and the department is responsible for certifying educational achievements by using evaluation instruments and techniques in a way that ensures the reliability and validity of examinations.

The first five years of schooling at the primary stage of education is crucial to lay a firm foundation for the subsequent learning of the child. This period is demarcated into three key stages: key stage 1: grades 1 and 2; key stage 2: grades 3 and 4; and key stage 3: grade 5. At the end of each stage, all children are expected to achieve given essential learning competencies (ELCs). Besides, there are also desirable learning competencies (DLCs) for those gifted children. The integrated primary national curriculum is child-centred and activity-based at every stage. There is less emphasis on examinations and structure, but more on developing the child's mind, skills, values, and abilities. Nonetheless, at the end of the primary stage of education, grade five scholarship examination is conducted. The scheme of giving bursaries to deserving students was started in the early 1940s; at the time, there was no free education in the English medium. The original purpose of the grade 5 scholarship examination was to provide financial support (bursaries) for bright students (based on the results/merit of the examination) of economically disadvantaged families to study at the post-primary level and, if successful in public examinations, up to degree level. Later, the grade 5 scholarship examination was also used to select students for placement in so-called prestigious (popular) secondary schools, especially, in urban areas and big cities. This scholarship examination is considered an asset for students from villages to move to better schools with government scholarships. The grade 5 scholarship examination has been administered annually by the DoE under the Ministry of Education (MoE) to grade 5 students in public and private schools. The examination is held in two mediums: Sinhala, and Tamil. The need for the bursary scheme and the selected examination continues to this day. Nonetheless, the competitiveness of the examination has harmed children. Even though it is not compulsory for children to sit for this examination, parents, teachers, and school principals are encouraging students to sit for the examination. At present, the originally envisaged purpose of the examination is undermined, and the secondary purpose has dominated.

The secondary education stage of eight years is further subdivided into three levels. These are: junior secondary level from grade six to grade nine; senior secondary level reading to GCE OL (grades 10 and 11, usually ages 15-16), and senior secondary level reading to GCE AL (grades 12 and 13).

The examination is held in three mediums Sinhala, Tamil, and English. GCE 'O' and 'A' levels examinations serve as 'gatekeepers' controlling access to highly prized, but extremely limited opportunities (Bethell, 2005). GCE OL is also an important stage for the further educational development of students as it provides a path to higher education. GCE OL curriculum consists of six core subjects and three or four optional subjects selected from several groups of subjects. Students who pass in six subjects with the first language, mathematics, and three subjects at credit or higher level qualify to follow the GCE AL course under a selected subject stream (i.e., bioscience, mathematics, commerce, technology, arts, and general streams). Further, students who pass GCE OL can enter the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector or directly enter the labour market.

The GCE AL course is of a two-year duration and constitutes the final stage of secondary education. In grade 13, students sit for the GCE AL examination. GCE AL serves dual purposes: (a) an attainment examination, and (b) a selection examination (passing the GCE AL examination is a prerequisite for entrance into public universities). The Sri Lankan national education system which is under the free education policy has been designated to select the best-performing set of students out of the total student cohort in the country to enrol in the public universities in Sri Lanka using the GCE AL examination which is a curriculum-based selection examination (based on the rank of z-score). Moreover, this examination is also considered as qualifying for enrolling in other higher/further education institutions at local and international levels. These selected students are trained to produce the best human resources for the country (as well as globally). The latter is highly competitive because the number of public university positions/placements available is limited (Dunder, et. al., 2017), especially, in professional courses.

Considering the current status of the national curriculum and national examination systems in Sri Lanka, it is evident that a considerable number of positive achievements. Despite, such system achievements, there can be seen negative implications emerged in the system due to policy and operational practices in the examination system. Like it or not, the Sri Lankan education system is much more examination-oriented and exam-centred. This nature of the education system is one of the root-causes of educational issues and challenges in Sri Lanka. Indeed, as a result of historical practices in the education system, quasi-market (as well as pure-market) features can be seen in the system. Historical evidence shows, that regardless of household income level, every parent expects to provide a better education for their children, because parents belonging to the middle and lower social classes of the income levels strongly believe that education is the most effective solution for their unrealized socio-economic problems and expectations especially.

Therefore, such parents attempt to provide better education for their children to acquire better living conditions for their children, which is the dream of their life. This should not be criticized, because many Sri Lankans strongly believe that education is the prime factor for social mobility (Wehella & Balasooriya, 2014:104-105).

Education as a social sector subject, curriculum including examinations is one of the major sensitive matters and is frequently deliberated among policymakers, academics, technocrats, social groups, stakeholders, and the general public. Almost every education policy proposal, framework, reform initiative, and policy brief has widely deliberated on reforming or modernization of examination, testing, and evaluation system in Sri Lanka (e.g., 1960/61: education changes, 1966/67: education changes, 1972: education reforms, 1981: education whitepaper proposals, 1997: education reforms, 2003: 2009: 2012: 2016: NEC education policy proposals, 2019: MoE policy proposals, 2020: Presidential taskforce proposals, 2019-20: education reforms, 2020-2023: NEC led NEPF, 2023: Parliamentary Select Committee, 2023-2033: NEPF) but the remedial measures are yet to be at the discussed level (Balasooriya, 2024).

Moreover, the new government came to the office with futuristic visions for the changing system and has given priority to education (National Peoples' Power (Jathika Jana Balawegaya) (2024) A Thriving Nation – A Beautiful Life, Presidential Election Manifesto of the Presidential Candidate of the NPP). The government is willing to reform the education system in line with the government policy directives following a participatory approach. The government has a plan for system change with a long-term vision. Considering these backgrounds, this is high time to take action for radical departures in education with special reference to curriculum reforms, including national examination, testing, evaluation, and assessment.

2.0 Scope of the study

Purpose and objectives: The primary purpose of this policy brief is to study the present national examination systems in school education in Sri Lanka. Under this objective, it analyses critical issues that emerged due to the existing testing and evaluation practices. Indeed, an association of national trends in education and using international experiences present policy suggestions for the consideration of future policy formulation in education.

Methodology of the study: The study method of this policy brief mainly employed a qualitative approach, including critical incident technique, and content analysis. Accordingly, a substantial set of primary and secondary data and information was collected by reviewing the literature -both international and context-specific literature- and conducting in-depth direct interviews (IDIs) with experts on the subject.

Expected outputs and outcomes: The expected outcome of this policy brief is to disclose the current national examination systems of school education in Sri Lanka. Further, this brief also intends to reveal issues and implications in education, social, and economic perspectives existing due present examination system. Moreover, the policy brief collects and presents potential measures for the consideration of future policymaking and practices in school education in Sri Lanka.

3.0 National Examination System in Sri Lanka: Current Status, Issues, and Implications

One of the outcomes of school education is to acquire cognitive and non-cognitive educational/learning outcomes by students. Generally, many educational achievements and outcomes can be tangible, whilst many others are intangible, and generally, such intangible outcomes are demonstrated through the citizens' behaviours. Currently, access to and participation in primary and secondary education is not much serious issue in the education system in Sri Lanka. Nonetheless, there are a few locations with remaining such issues but gradually addressing the issue to mitigate the gaps. Noticeably, the system is currently facing challenges and issues of quality of education, especially in producing ethically and morally conscious skilled citizens to cater to national and international labour markets and societies. School education curriculum and implementation, as well as assessment systems, are key fundamental factors in building and improving the cognitive and non-cognitive educational/learning outcomes of students and their education. Other factors such as a conducive learning environment, readiness, governance, administration so on, are supportive and supplementary factors to better delivery of curriculum to achieve national goals and targets of education.

Students' learning performances are the best indication of the education quality of the system since any education system should ensure the development of cognitive and practical skills of the students. Both formative and summative evaluation principles are used in student assessments at school and national levels. The present school examinations/assessments system in Sri Lanka is executed in two stages: (i) national-level and (ii) school-based. There are three national-level examinations (i.e., grade 5 scholarship examination, GCE OL, and GCE AL examinations) which are held for various purposes at different educational stages.

DoE conducts all the national examinations. Further, respective schools, in line with the national policy directives, conduct school-based assessments (SBA). Currently, students are evaluated only based on their success at written examinations. After the grade five scholarship examination, the only other evaluation received by students is the GCE OL examination taken at the end of grade 11. GCE AL examination is taken at the end of grade 13 which is the termination year of the school education. Mainly, these examinations are paper- and pencil-based tests, mostly testing the memories of students. However, some selected subjects include practical assessment components. The well-established summative examination system in the education system in Sri Lanka accepted and recognised GCE OL and GCE AL certificates locally and internationally.

Moreover, implementation of national-level examination in the system has led to several implications and issues related to education, social, economic, household, and values. Regarding assessment and evaluation, one of the key issues is the huge competition among candidates at all national-level examinations. This resulted in crate examination malpractices, difficulty levels of examinations, student cramming instead of development of knowledge, attitudes, and skills, student mental health issues due to failure and poor results at examinations, and insufficient accommodation of differently abled candidates in the present summative examination system.

Grade 5 Scholarship Examination

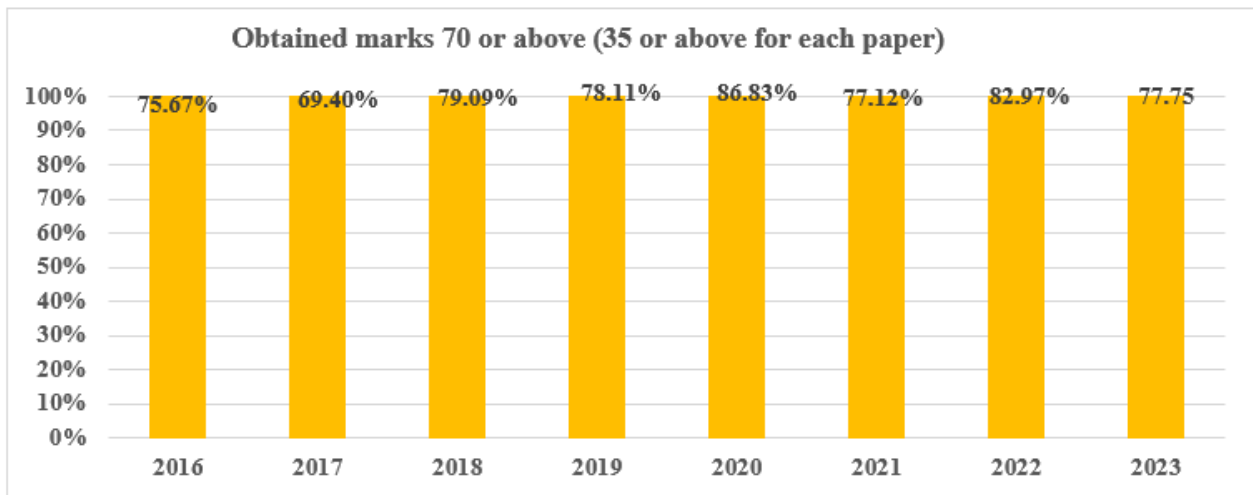
According to the School Census, 2023 (MoE, 2024), grade 1 admission in government schools in Sri Lanka was 287,639 (Female: 141,325 (49%), Male: 146,314 (51%). The end of the primary stage of school education is grade 5 and these students have to sit for the grade five scholarship examination to be eligible for bursaries for students who belong to low-income households. Concurrently, higher-performing students from this examination are eligible to apply for placements in so-called prestigious (popular) secondary schools. Data on the status of the grade five scholarship examination is given in Table 1 and Graph 1.

Table 1: Performance of Grade Five Scholarship Examination (2018 - 2023)

Details		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. sat	Number	350,191	332,168	326,264	335,158	329,668	332,944
Obtained marks 70 or above (35 or above for each paper)	Number	276,978	259,445	283,305	258,481	273,515	258,871
	%	79.09	78.11	86.83	77.12	82.97	77.75
Obtained marks 100 or above (50 or above for each paper)	Number	-	190,151	215,696	161,202	157,624	150,017
	%	-	57.25	66.11	48.10	47.81	45.06
Equal or above the Cut-off (Qualified to receive bursaries and apply for schools)	Number	36,144	47,667	47,193	47,536	48,257	50,664
	%	10.32	14.35	14.46	14.18	14.64	15.22
Mean of marks	%	117.98	114.38	125.65	109.31	115.11	111.74
Standard Deviation of marks	%	37.58	36.85	36.42	34.75	32.17	34.98

Source: DoE (2023a).

Graph 1: Grade 5 scholarship examination (2016-2023)



Source: DoE (2021a; 2023a).

Table 1 shows the situation of the grade 5 scholarship examination of selected years from 2018 to 2023, and Graph 1 shows the percentage of candidates (2016-2023) who obtained marks 70 or above (35 or above for each paper). Out of the total number of students who sat for the examination, only insignificant numbers less than 15% of students (except 2023), are qualified to receive bursaries and apply for popular secondary schools. From the point of internal efficiency perspective, policymakers and respective authorities of education need to think and react in this situation as the majority of students do not benefit from sitting for this examination. However, it should be noted that a significant number of students obtained marks 70 or above (35 or above for each paper) and obtained marks 100 or above (50 or above for each paper). Notwithstanding, the grade 5 scholarship examination is not compulsory for all students in grade 5, but school authorities and parents encourage students to sit for the examination due to institutional and individual expectations and reasons.

From a positive point of view, the grade 5 scholarship examination is the only way to admit children from disadvantaged backgrounds to national or (so-called) popular secondary schools. Nevertheless, authorities are still proposing different options to reduce the burden on children as well as parents, and no effective scenarios are presented. The government policy provides 13 years of education, and hence, considering the current context, there is deliberation is going on whether the grade 5 scholarship examination is still valid and are there any justification for the continuation of the examination. Policymakers need to decide in this regard.

Implications, Issues, and Challenges: As learned, the grade 5 scholarship examination is a much more competitive examination of school education in Sri Lanka. Even though children are not compulsory for sit this examination, parents, teachers, and school principals are encouraged students to present the examination.

Because authorities and the school community considered the performance of the grade 5 scholarship examination as demonstrating the levels of school achievements. General perception on matters related to this examination is, that the purpose and assessing the performance of students is agreeable, but the present culture and practice of examination are root causes of many issues. Due to limited places in the so-called popular secondary schools, this examination has become more competitive, and hence, this is considered a parents' (especially mother's) examination and a much more sensitive one. Due to such demand, this examination has become one of the most lucrative education stages in the tuition industry. There is no argument, this examination became a competitive instrument for popular schools due to the rivalry among some popular schools. The competitiveness of the examination has harmed children, and today, this examination caused many educational issues and constraints.

Education Perspectives: As already discussed, the primary stage of school education comprises three key stages and learning competencies have been defined to be acquired in each stage. Primary education should be joyful and activity-based and encourage to inculcate children's social values and customs. Learning at key stage 3 allows to use of the 'siting learning' approach.

The primary curriculum has been designed in line with the psychological and educational fundamentals and principles on par with the child's mental, physical, and personality growth. Many schools having primary classes, especially in urban areas, followed different strategies for coaching children to face the grade 5 scholarship examination. For example, some schools conduct special coaching classes starting from grades 3 or 4. Some schools conduct early-morning classes before school starts, and then students attend formal school and after-school classes, too. Subsequently, parents take their children to private tuition (individual or group or mass classes) and, on weekends and public holidays, attend said tuition classes. Further, to increase the results of private tuition classes they conduct special coaching camps, answering past or model 1,000 questions, special holiday sessions, Zoom classes, etc. These are not natural ways and many of these are artificial ones. Many students forced to dream on the island ranks of the examination and after issuing results, schools are display name boards, banners, and media publicity (social media, electronic media, and printed media) about performed students. As a result of these artificial competitions, some of the students face health and psychological problems (frequently felt illness, stress, mental disorder, etc.), nutrition problems, and social issues. From the point of educational perspective, many students are not ready to follow secondary education properly. They are in lack analytical skills, critical thinking, common sense, poor IQ knowledge, and poor cognitive skills.

The average number of students in the cohort performed well even without such artificial and forceful attempts. However, due to bad practices, it has been noted that students with real talents are missed and do not give adequate attention to them. Past education policy frameworks and reform initiatives have been seriously discussed matters on the structure of the examination and its practices, but nothing substantial happened to this examination and surviving up to now (de Mel, 2022; Balasooriya, 2024).

Social and Values Perspectives: As a result of unnecessary burdens for young children, they miss social work skills, enjoying childhood life, family engagements, etc. Such skills and habits are essential to shape life in the future.

Economic and Household Perspectives: Despite parents' income level, all households are spending a considerable chunk of monies for children's education to provide better education (e.g., school matters, tuition, stationeries, meals, transport, etc.). This will lead to face economic burden of low-income households. Such unaffordable circumstances directly impact to day-to-day living matters of respective families. Directly or indirectly, such a situation will pave the way for children's nutrition matters, learning, and normal life.

GCE OL Examination

Regardless of the performance levels of the grade 5 scholarship examination, in grade 11 every student is eligible to sit for the GCE OL examination. GCE OL examination is conducted based on the national curriculum. Primarily GCE OL examination is a selective examination. Details of the performance of school candidates for the GCE OL examination (1st attempt) are given in Table 2.

Table 2: Performance of GCE OL examination (2015-2023) - Performance of School Candidates (1st attempt) by year

Details		2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. Sat (5 or More subjects)	Number	273,224	286,251	296,812	296,029	305,427	308,134	311,321	317,326	322,537
	%									
Qualified for GCE AL	Number	189,428	200,208	216,815	222,281	225,539	236,015	231,982	236,041	244,228
	%	69.33	69.94	73.05	75.09	73.84	76.59	74.52	74.38	75.72
Obtained 9 "A" passes	Number	6,102	8,224	9,960	9,261	10,201	11,661	10,863	13,380	13,309
	%	2.23	2.87	3.36	3.13	3.34	3.78	3.49	4.22	4.13
Failed in All subjects (Appeared for 6 or more subjects)	Number	8,698	8,900	7,308	5,917	7,007	5,764	6,566	7,045	6,841
	%	3.18	3.11	2.46	2.00	2.29	1.87	2.11	2.22	2.12

Source: DoE (2022; 2024a).

Table 2 shows the system performance levels of school candidates of the secondary education, and such evidence illustrates the level of efficiency in the system. Approximately, annual grade 1 admission is 300,000. Out of them at the end of grade 11, a considerable number of students sit for the GCE OL examination. Out of them, approximately, 30% of students are not qualified (at the 1st attempt) for the reading of GCE AL courses. However, need to pay attention to the students who failed in all subjects, because it shouldn't be evaluated in this manner as students spent 11 years of schooling. Globally, the completion rate is one of the key performance indicators that measure the internal efficiency of the system. The main aim is to provide at least basic competencies to students at each stage of education.

Implications, Issues, and Challenges: Another critical juncture of school education is the GCE OL examination. This examination is considered a selection examination to follow the GCE AL course as well as considered a basic qualification for labour market entrance for different basic jobs. Some of the students in schools without preferred GCE AL curriculum streams (e.g., science, mathematics, technology, commerce, etc.) try to get the best results for admission to secondary schools with all facilities. Having these backgrounds, the GCE OL examination has also become a more competitive one. Due to disparities in resourcing schools and the irrational distribution of schools across the system, several issues and constraints existed.

Education Perspectives: Concerning the GCE OL the national curriculum has defined the competencies that are needed to be acquired at the end of Grade 11. Currently, we can see students, parents, and the school community also looking forward to the students with the best result, mostly say 9-As. Similar to the grade 5 scholarship examination, after releasing examination results, schools, parents, alumni, and other groups promote performed students by highlighting their island rank. Teachers coach students to sit for the examination following different forms and ways. In addition to school education, almost all students are attending private tuition classes. Due to limited time spaces of students, they ignore the participation of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities at the school level. Due to missing part of the secondary education of students, we cannot expect citizens with balanced personality and these students are not fully confident to follow professional-oriented courses at GCE AL and beyond.

Social and Value Perspectives: As students are aiming to pass GCE OL with good results, many aspects of education and social components are missed. Currently, many education forums and platforms are organized to promote social-emotional learning/21st century learning skills/higher-order learning skills.

However, learning and practical engagement of students in such activities at the school level is very low. End of the day, many students have failed to incorporate social and value aspects of education into their lives.

Economic and Household Perspectives: Concerning household economic perspectives, generally education involves heavy costs in addition to free education. Parents have to spend substantial amounts of funds for their children's education. Most students attend private tuition or online education, and as such parents have to bear a considerable amount of money to fulfil the requirements. Considering the current economic situation, such additional spending is unaffordable to poor households, especially.

GCE AL Examination

Based on the GCE OL performance, students are allowed to select a subject stream and accordingly, they are following the GCE AL courses for two years. GCE AL examination is also conducted annually, and the majority of candidates enter this examination via their respective schools, while some candidates apply as private applicants. The GCE AL examination qualification serves as an entrance requirement for Sri Lankan State Universities in three mediums: Sinhala, Tamil, and English. The examination diversifies over six major streams such as: Science; Mathematics; Commerce; Arts; Technology; and Common/General. In each stream, candidates are expected to face 3 subjects related to their specific stream. Additionally, there would be a General English test and a common general test. Although the result of the General English test is not taken into account for the university entrance selection criteria, candidates are expected to obtain a pass mark for the common general test. GCE AL is the next selection examination to qualify for university entrance and/or follow any other higher/further education courses locally or overseas. This course will lay the foundation for higher studies in labour market-oriented way. Data related to the current status of the GCE AL examination in Sri Lanka is given in Table 3.

Table 3: GCE AL examinations: 2018 – 2023 (2024): Performance of School Candidates by Year

Details		2018	2019		2020	2021	2022	2023 (2024)
			New	Old				
No. sat	Number	218,191	173,781	61,769	251,168	236,035	232,797	229,057
Eligible for university entrance (passed in 3 subjects)	Number	141,172	108,353	46,552	165,711	149,946	149,487	151,343
	%	64.70	62.35	75.36	65.98	63.53	64.21	66.07
Obtained 3As	Number	4,912	5,424	1,161	7,278	9,313	9,434	9,854
	%	2.25	3.12	1.88	2.90	3.95	4.05	4.30
Failed in all subjects	Number	18,203	15,490	2,855	21,697	22,928	22,786	21,570
	%	8.34	8.91	4.62	8.64	9.71	9.79	9.42

Source: DoE (2024b).

As Table 3 shows, the present levels of the performance of GCE AL examination and these data exhibit the entire system level led to the future labour market. These data also indicate the level of system efficiency in education. Evidence shows there is a satisfactory level of performance acquired but gaps remain in providing higher education opportunities for students in Sri Lanka. Data on GCE AL examination achievements of all candidates by gender in 2021 and 2022 are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Performance of all candidates of GCE AL examinations (2021 & 2022)

Details	2021					2022				
	Male		Female		Total	Male		Female		Total
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	Number	%	Number	%	Number
Number applied	144,709	42	196,755	58	341,464	136,051	41	192,846	59	328,897
Number sat	111,780	41	160,902	59	272,682	107,709	41	156,224	59	263,933
Number eligible for university entrance	59,926	35	111,571	65	171,497	58,124	35	108,814	65	166,938

Source: DoE (2023b).

As Table 4 shows, GCE AL examination in 2021 (all candidates) girls are performing better than boys. As per the results of the GCE AL examination in 2021, only 111,780 (41%) male students sat for the examination compared to 160,902 (59%) female students who sat for the examination. As per the results, 35 per cent of male and 65 per cent of female students were eligible for university entrance. This is a natural gender gap that emerged due to the student population and other casual factors.

Further, as data given in Table 4 shows even though more than 60 per cent of students are eligible for university entrance, no guarantee to admit all of them into the state universities due to limited placement in public universities. When we are analysing data by degree courses, especially professional-oriented courses (e.g., medicine, engineering, ICT, law, etc.) situation is much varied. Most parents are willing to send their children to state universities, as many of them are not able to enrol their children in private universities as such institutions are more expensive. Every student who is completing school education they are willing to enrol in university programmes as most of the population believes that receiving a good education is the only solution for their unsolved problems and future ambitions. On the other hand, many people strongly consider education as a social mobility factor. Further, very few numbers of students (as well as parents) have given preference for following technical and vocational courses as their first choice. These types of decisions also contributed to the competitiveness of the GCE AL examination.

Implications, Issues, and Challenges: The GCE AL examination is the most competitive one in the national examination system in Sri Lanka. Due to limited opportunities/placements in the state universities, especially professional courses, such demand is created. Further, after completing school education, students need to find an avenue for higher/further education or opportunities in the labour market.

Education Perspectives: Generally, GCE 'O' and 'A' level curricula are inconsistent with the goals and objectives of general education and have a heavy examination orientation with national examinations receiving too much attention from students, parents, and schools. Current, school curricula and examinations continue on a content-heavy and stereotyped cognitive learning model. Such practices lead to ignoring socio-emotional learning skills/21st century skills.

Social and Value Perspectives: Every student following a GCE AL course has to allocate a considerable amount of time for that. During that period, they have no time to enjoy life and sacrifice many social, and family commitments and no extra work. Such will impact their personal, social, and cultural life.

Economic and Household Perspectives: As discussed, doing GCE AL is costly, especially for low-income households. Additional costs need to be borne for tuition classes, learning materials, stationery, transport, meals, etc. GCE AL courses are mostly academic-oriented and less attention has been given to improving labour market skills. If anyone unsuccessful in GCE AL at the expected level, obviously they will face difficulties in finding a place in the labour market in the future.

School-based Assessments (SBA)

For many years, educationists, and policymakers in Sri Lanka have advocated the need and use of formative assessment in the classroom to promote better teaching and learning. Implementation of such initiatives faced many problems, issues, and challenges, nonetheless, there can be seen progress has been made. From the junior secondary level onwards students' work is assessed through different evaluation procedures including written tests and observation of practical work. Apart from the national-level examinations, the national curriculum framework has given guidelines to the teacher to conduct SBA at the school level to monitor the learning achievements of students. Required guidelines have been issued by the MoE in collaboration with DoE and the National Institute of Education (NIE).

Implications, Issues, and Challenges: One of the main issues in the implementation of SBA is credibility and validity. Further, updating teacher capacity of key to sound implementation of SBA.

However, the absence of continuation of capacity development of teachers is negatively affected by SBA. Further, in Sri Lanka classroom assessment is used to diagnose students' learning issues, provide feedback to students on their learning, and inform parents about their children's learning (Dundar, et.al, 2017:98).

Learning Outcomes

The assessment of learning outcomes is crucial for policymakers regarding the status of student learning, on disparities in learning outcomes between geographical areas or population sub-groups national assessments (NAs) are conducted for grades 4 and 8. This study is conducted jointly by the MoE and the National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (NEREC), Sri Lanka. The performance of the NA of grade 4 in mathematics and English is given in Table 5.

Table 5: Percentages of students scoring 50 or above, and below 50 of the NA of grade 4 students of mathematics and English (2022/2023)

Province	Percentages of students scoring 50 or above, and below 50			
	Mathematics		English	
	Above or equal to 50%	Below 50%	Above or equal to 50%	Below 50%
Western	84.52	15.48	70.74	29.26
Central	77.56	22.44	52.95	47.05
Southern	86.06	13.94	71.17	28.83
Northern	73.98	26.02	40.92	59.08
Eastern	75.12	24.88	53.33	46.67
<u>North Western</u>	82.87	17.13	59.39	40.61
North Central	74.01	25.99	47.58	52.42
Uva	84.47	15.53	57.38	42.62
Sabaragamuwa	84.37	15.63	62.45	37.55
Sri Lanka	80.40	19.60	60.95	39.05

Source: MoE & NEREC (2023a: 23; 63).

As Table 5 shows, the performance of grade 04 students in mathematics is at a satisfactory level to some extent, but further attention needs to be paid to the student cohort with marks below 50 per cent. With regard to English education, Northern and North Central provinces have shown poor performances, and provincial variation can be noticed. However, overall, policymakers, planners, sand technocrats need to pay attention to taking remedial measures and accelerate the improvement of the learning outcomes of students in grade 4 as the cohort is about to complete the primary cycle of education.

The performance of the NA of grade 8 in mathematics and English is given in Table 6.

Table 6: Percentages of students scoring 50 or above, and below 50 of the NA of grade 8 students of mathematics and English (2022/2023)

Province	Percentages of students scoring 50 or above, and below 50			
	Mathematics		English	
	Above or equal to 50%	Below 50%	Above or equal to 50%	Below 50%
Western	62.96	37.04	37.19	62.81
Central	53.59	46.41	27.46	72.54
Southern	62.22	37.78	21.57	78.43
Northern	53.24	46.76	19.68	80.32
Eastern	54.56	45.44	23.98	76.02
<u>North Western</u>	57.44	42.56	23.43	76.57
North Central	61.44	38.56	27.25	72.75
Uva	52.75	47.25	10.31	89.69
Sabaragamuwa	57.02	42.98	16.61	83.39
Sri Lanka	57.33	42.67	28.66	71.34

Source: MoE & NEREC (2023b: 25; 69).

As Table 6 shows, performance mathematics of grade 8 students is at a satisfactory level, but further attention needs to be paid to student cohorts who obtained marks below 50 per cent. With regard to English education, in all provinces, the average percentage of students obtained above or equal to 50 per cent is 57.25 per cent and the average percentage of students obtained below 50 per cent is 42.75 per cent. Therefore, this subject needs to be further improved through various modes of intervention.

Private Tuition Education: Shadow Education

As a result of imposing quasi-market features in education in Sri Lanka, there are visible and unofficial sub-systems established in the country (Wehella & Balasooriya, 2014:108). Since the open economic policy took place (in 1977) in the country private tuition culture is mushrooming and considered a lucrative business. Grade 5 scholarship examination, GCE OL, and GCE AL examinations are more competitive, and tuition education is mainly focused on these examinations. However, currently, all subjects of grade 1 to GCE AL are given tuition and a majority of students are attending tuition classes.

However, this shadow education system is harmful to the poorest cohort of the income level. As a result of students being tempted to attend private tuition, GCE AL students in many schools are not attending schools regularly and this is now common in GCE OL classes too. Such a situation is wastage of the time of teachers and resources too.

Despite the income level of parents, they encourage their children to participate in private tuition as they believe providing the best education for their children is the only solution for their unsolved many problems and dreams of future life. This unnecessary burden emerged due to implementing the examination-oriented system and high completion for reserving a place in state universities, especially for professional-oriented courses. Anyhow, authorities have failed at least to implement a regulatory system for the private tuition system (Parliament of Sri Lanka, 2023). Generally, many private tuition classes are running based on their own style, in an ad-hoc manner and are poorly focused on improving the quality of education and acquiring learning competencies of students as their main target is on passing examinations. However, as a result of the private tuition industry, many direct and indirect job opportunities have been created.

1.0 What Happens in Other Countries? International Best Practices

National examinations have a powerful influence on the lives of students and their future (Dundar, et. al., 2017). When studying assessment and evaluation mechanisms in many education systems of the world, it can be seen that such frameworks are key components of the curriculum. It is evident, that countries with good education systems, have developed their evaluation and assessment systems on par with students' age and curriculum stages. In so doing, they have considered students' mental, physical, and personality growth in line with the psychological and educational principles. A few examples are discussed to understand the situation in other countries and learn lessons to apply positive elements to reform examination and assessment systems in Sri Lanka.

General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) in the UK provides a uniform framework for assessment, with all candidates in all subjects graded. But Scotland has a different system, their examinations for standard grades, higher grades, and advanced grades are taken at different ages (Dundar, et. al., 2017). There is no evidence of high competition for these examinations and no evidence of students' stress examination phobia.

Higher secondary education is made available to all and disconnected lower and senior secondary examinations in favour of SBA of student performance in individual subjects in Queensland, Australia. Admission to higher education is controlled through the school assessments, statistically moderated using scores on a general ability test all students take (Dundar, et. al., 2017). Victoria and Queensland, Australia, are implementing a student-friendly examination system, and no burdens are placed on students.

Curriculum and assessment systems in Singapore are given priority to develop creative thinking and learning skills of students. Accordingly, the examination formats have been revised, especially in science, humanities, mathematics, and aesthetics subjects.

Examinations and assessment systems need to maintain transparency. Canada and Ireland have well-established systems in examinations and when they conduct examinations they return the marked scripts to the candidates. Further, Ireland and British Columbia in Canada follow the practice of pre-scrutiny of examination results by the respective schools (NEC, 2014). As a result, there are no complaints, and examinations have become transparent, and public confidence is safeguarded. Considering the good lessons, Queensland, Australia, and New Zealand also moving to follow these practices.

Some countries have followed to integrate SBA with public examinations. Hong Kong, New Zealand, Ireland, and Canada where the British systems were used have practiced integrating SBA with public examinations, and Sri Lanka is also in line with this direction to some extent.

Schools in the USA and Canada and all American and Canadian, international schools have set minimum standards for every student to perform (NEC, 2014). Further, many education systems have taken measures to assess the performance of co-curricular activities and engagement in social works.

Beyond the examination systems, internationally encouraged to conduct national assessments and to participate in international assessments in order to improve the learning outcomes of students. National assessment of learning outcomes reflects curriculum objectives and sets competency standards. Findings of national assessments are used to develop system capacity and policymaking purposes in order to maintain the balanced development of the education systems.

More and more developing countries in specific regions are conducting regional assessments to improve the education standards of their respective regions.

Furthermore, developing countries now participate in international assessments and such assessments have been designed to provide information both about a country's education system and about how its students compare with those of other countries. The international assessment results show the levels of governance and accountability status of respective countries.

1.0 Policy Recommendations

Generally, assessment and examination methods have a profound impact on how and what students learn and the way they subsequently use new knowledge, ranging from mostly factual knowledge to abilities and skills, and from surface learning to deep learning. Traditional exams and evaluations can exert pressure on students which may affect both the learning process and memory formation in different ways. However, responses to stress depend on the temperament of each individual, among other factors (Bueno, n.d.). Having such notion, based on the findings of this policy brief study; to address prevailing issues and constraints in national examinations and evaluation systems as well as to fill the policy gaps in national requirements some doable policy recommendations are presented for the consideration of policymakers.

National Policy on Education: The authorities need to formulate a national policy on education covering the entire education system following a scientific policy formulation approach and techniques. In so doing need to review, past policy initiatives and learn lessons from them. Regarding national curriculum reforms, testing/evaluation/assessments/examinations should be key interlinked components of the curriculum. The curriculum should be which mode of assessment is used to evaluate students' performance. Evaluation should be aligned with the child's mental, physical, and personality growth. Reforming examination systems cannot be done in isolation, hence, often requires changes in the entire system of the education system.

Assessment and evaluation are key indications of the levels of education. However, it should not be a burden with stressful manner for students. Assessment and evaluation are the main parts of the national curriculum, and it needs to show the status of learning achievement levels. These assessments, evaluations, and testing can be conducted in different points of learning stages (i.e. module-based/portfolios-based, school-level, regional-level, national-level, etc.) in line with the national guidance and directives ensuring standards. At present, education systems in developed countries promote applying projects, assignments, and teamwork continuously. Less weightage needs to be placed on final, summative examinations such as GCE OL and GCE AL examinations.

- Revise or amend the national assessment and evaluation framework in line with the national curriculum framework in order to mitigate huge competition at national-level summative examinations. It should introduce the structure of the national-level examinations and SBA/module-based assessment system.

The assessment system needs to simplify, and a new assessment framework needs to be adopted gradually in the system. A mixed marks system is practically suited for the system (e.g., starting from 70 per cent and decreasing it to 50 per cent gradually based on examination marks and starting from 30 per cent and increasing it to 50 per cent gradually based on module-based/SBA marks). Finally, this will pave the way to reduce the burden of students and teachers in assessment and evaluation. In addition, need to promote classroom-level assessments and give recognition to assessment scores.

- Declare a national policy on selection examinations e.g. grade 5 scholarship examination, GCE OL examination. In addition, also need to declare the policy directives on SBA systems.
- Decide the subject quantity of GCE OL and decide which subjects are measuring at the school level and which are measuring at the national level.
- Promote the usage of technology in assessment and evaluation. Further, it needs to empower the teachers to make use of digitally available resources for assessment. In addition, needs to provide assessment tools and instructions through the Assessment Resource Hub for teachers and preparation material for students through learning management systems (LMS).
- Improve the assessment and evaluation skills of teachers. Hence, need to implement continuous professional development (CPD) programmes for teachers regarding assessment and evaluation.

Implementation of Grade Point Average (GPA) System: The current grading system needs to change and implement the GPA system in national examinations. It has been reported the basic steps have been taken to introduce the GPA system in Sri Lanka (standardizing against international benchmarks) and need to expedite the initiative. Need to learn lessons from other systems' success in these initiations to avoid negative effects.

Classroom Assessments: To improve the learning outcomes of students, need to have a learner-friendly assessment system, hence classroom assessments provide evidence of levels of students' learning status in the classroom. When implementing classroom assessment, different forms of application can apply, and real-time databases can be maintained.

Options of Education: Students who proceed to secondary education need to have the option to select academic, vocational, or mixed streams for their careers.

Learning Outcomes: Measuring the learning outcomes of students is a timely requirement to understand the level of education and such evidence is much needed for policymaking and planning purposes to improve the quality of education in any country. Producing comparable data on learning in low- and middle-income countries is critical to addressing learning poverty. For this purpose, a proposal to undertake a national assessment for learning outcomes (NALO) for grade 3 students is needed regularly. It is also necessary to include reading, writing, and calculations in this assessment criteria. Further, undertaking a NALO in junior secondary grades among 15-year-old students regularly is a necessity. Findings and recommendations of these assessments could be used for policymaking and planning purposes, especially improving teaching and learning in classrooms as well as improving the professional capacity of teachers.

Participation in International Assessments: Proposed to find feasibility for the participation of international assessments (i.e., TIMSS, PISA).

Home-based Learning: Promote and provide educational guidance and directives for improving the home-based learning atmosphere. Such a learner-friendly home learning environment will impact the continuation of students, especially in an unexpected period (e.g. health, economic, and social crises situation as well as natural disaster situations hindering for closure of schools).

References

- Balasooriya, B.M.J., Wehella, M.M., & Wijeratne, S.U. (2010) Sri Lanka, in P. Peterson, E. Baker & B. McGaw (Eds.), *International Encyclopaedia of Education*, Vol. 5, pp. 813-825, Oxford, UK: Elsevier
- Balasooriya, Jayantha (2024) *Analysis of Education Policies, Policy Frameworks, and Reform Initiatives in Sri Lanka: Strengths, relevance, and gaps in education policies and policymaking*, Colombo: Coalition for Education Development
- Bethell, G. (2005) *Educational Standards, Assessment, and Examinations in Sri Lanka: A survey of practices and issues*, (Unpublished), Human Development Unit, Soth Asia Region, The World Bank
- Bueno, David (n.d.) *Exams as a source of stress: How assessments may affect learning, through stress*, IBRO & UNESCO
- de Mel, Tara (2022) *Reforming Education: Challenges to Change, Education Reforms 1996-2005*, Author Publication
- Department of Examinations (2021) *Performance of Candidates, GCE OL Examination - 2021*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Department of Examinations (2022) *Performance of Candidates: GCE OL Examination - 2022*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Department of Examinations (2023a) *Performance of Candidates: Grade 5 Scholarship Examination - 2023*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Department of Examinations (2023b) *Performance of Candidates, GCE AL Examination - 2022 (2023)*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Department of Examinations (2024a) *Performance of Candidates: GCE OL Examination - 2023*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Department of Examinations (2024b) *GCE AL examination - 2023 (2024): Performance of Candidates*, Battaramulla: Department of Examinations
- Dunder, H., Millot, B., Riboud, M., Shojo, M., Aturupane, H., Goyal, S., & Raju, D. (2017) *Sri Lanka Education Sector Assessment, Achievements, Challenges, and Policy Options, Directions in Development*, Human Development, Washington DC: World Bank Group
- Government of Ceylon (1968) *Public Examinations Act No. 25 of 1968*
- Jayaratne, S.M.G., Wijeratne, S.U., Medagama, R.S., Wehella, M.M., & Balasooriya, Jayantha (2013) *Education First: Sri Lanka*, Battaramulla: Policy and Planning Branch, Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Education (2024) *Annual School Census of Sri Lanka, Summary Report – 2023 (2024)*, Battaramulla: Ministry of Education
- Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka & National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (2023a) *National Report: National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of the subjects of Mathematics and English of students completing Grade 4 in the year 2022/2023*, Colombo: NEREC, University of Colombo
- Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka & National Education Research and Evaluation Centre (2023b) *National Report: National Assessment of Learning Outcomes of the subjects of Mathematics and English of students completing Grade 8 in the year 2022/2023*, Colombo: NEREC, University of Colombo
- National Education Commission (2014) *Study on Evaluation & the Assessment System in General Education in Sri Lanka, Research Series (2014) – No. 03*, Nugegoda: NEC
- National Peoples' Power (Jathika Jana Balawegaya) (2024) *A Thriving Nation – A Beautiful Life, Presidential Election Manifesto of the Presidential Candidate of the NPP*, Battaramulla: NPP

- Parliament of Sri Lanka (2023) Report of Select Committee of Parliament to make suitable recommendations for the expansion of Higher Education opportunities in Sri Lanka, Parliamentary Series No. 100, Battaramulla: Parliament of Sri Lanka
- Wehella, M.M. & Balasooriya, B.M.J. (2014) Unseen Features: Challenges for Free Education Policy in Sri Lanka in Journal of Comparative Education, November, 2014, No. 77, pp. 91-124, Chinese Taipei Comparative Education Society

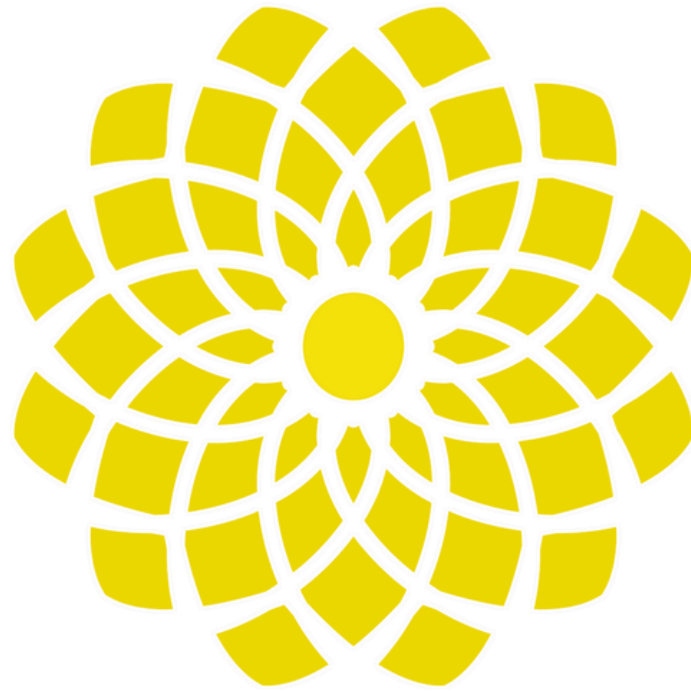
About the Author



Dr. Jayantha Balasooriya is a Freelance consultant, writer, and veteran educationist specializing in the economics of education, education policy, and education planning. Previously, he belonged to the Sri Lanka Education Administrative Service and worked in different sections, and institutions in the education sector and finally worked as a Director of Education (Education Policy and Planning) in the Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka. Further, Jayantha Balasooriya with a strong educational, academic, and professional background in project planning, education/school budgeting/financing, education research, teacher education and teacher management, results-based monitoring and evaluation, national and international assessments, social cohesion, education management, and administration plus strong analytical, and interpersonal skills. He is the author of books, journal articles, research, newspaper articles, concept papers, and working papers published locally and internationally.

About the **BALPP** Monograph Series

The **BALPP Monograph Series** offers research that provides a comprehensive exploration of critical issues in public policy, governance, and socio-economic development. These in-depth publications, crafted by leading experts and scholars, aim to provide innovative solutions and actionable insights for policymakers, academics, and thought leaders.



Bandaranaike Academy
for Leadership & Public Policy