

Policy Brief



**Advancing Policy Innovation in Education in Sri Lanka:
Bridging Inequities through Governance Reform and
Data-Driven Policy**

Based on insights from a Policy Dialogue held at the BMICH, February 28, 2026

By Shayani Jayasinghe

Advancing Policy Innovation in Education in Sri Lanka: Bridging Inequities through Governance Reform and Data-Driven Policy

Policy Discussion – Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership & Public Policy

Date: 28th February 2026

Executive Summary

Sri Lanka's education system, while historically strong in access and literacy, is increasingly constrained by systemic inequities, governance inefficiencies, lack of innovation and evolving socio-economic demands. Addressing these challenges requires a shift from uniform policy approaches to targeted, data-driven, and equity-oriented reforms.

This policy brief, informed by a BALPP policy dialogue, highlights that meaningful reform must combine equity-focused policy interventions, strategic leadership, empowered educators, and the effective use of technology. It proposes actionable recommendations to support inclusive, efficient, and future-ready education reform in Sri Lanka.

1. Background and Policy Context

Sri Lanka has long upheld a commitment to free education and high literacy rates. However, structural disparities across geography, income, and institutional capacity and demands for a digital economy continue to limit equitable access to quality education.

A recent policy dialogue organized by the Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy (BALPP), Colombo supported by Eduten and Avaaya Research, brought together key stakeholders to identify locally relevant and globally informed solutions to enhance learning outcomes, focusing not on critiquing current government reforms but on proposing practical, innovative policy pathways to improve efficiency.

The panel of experts comprised of:

- Mr. Harshana Perera- Attorney-at-Law and Principal, Asian International School, Colombo
- Ms. Chiranthi Senanayake- Visiting academic at BALPP, Horizon Campus, Open University of Sri Lanka and Gender Justice and Civil Society Capacity Building Consultant
- Mr. Thulith Edirisinghe – Co-founder and CEO of Meu Labs, Policy Innovation Specialist (Digital Transformation and Education Reform)
- Session Moderator- Dr. Tara de Mel, Executive Director of BALPP

2. Key Policy Challenges: Systemic Inequities in Education

Despite high enrollment rates, Sri Lanka's education system is marked by multi-layered inequities:

- Geographic disparities: Students in rural and estate sectors face limited access to quality secondary and tertiary education compared to their urban counterparts.

- **Resource gaps:** Unequal distribution of trained teachers, infrastructure, and learning materials undermines educational outcomes.
- **Institutional divide:** Provincial schools are often disadvantaged relative to better-resourced national schools.
- **Urban inequality:** Even within cities, elite schools enjoy reputational and material advantages over non-elite schools
- **Shadow education system:** There is a heavy reliance on private tuition, driven by intense competition and disparities in the standards and quality of schools, resources and teaching methods.
- **Economic barriers:** Despite the provision of free education, access remains influenced by household income, particularly in covering costs such as transport, private tuition, and learning materials.
- **Skills Mismatch and Global Competitiveness Gap:** Sri Lanka's education system remains insufficiently aligned with evolving global labour market demands, as its continued emphasis on exam-oriented learning over critical skills such as problem-solving, digital literacy, and adaptability has contributed to graduate underemployment, skills gaps, and reduced competitiveness in an increasingly technology-driven global economy.

These disparities highlight policy failures in equitable resource allocation, governance coordination, and long-term planning, ultimately constraining social mobility and inclusive socio-economic development.

3. Key Insights from the Policy Dialogue

3.1 Equity and Inclusion as a Policy Priority

Panelists emphasized that equity must be embedded at the core of education policy planning and implementation. Uniform policy frameworks often fail to address the needs of marginalized communities.

- Targeted interventions are required for rural, estate, and underprivileged populations.
- Policies must incorporate gender-sensitive and socially inclusive approaches.
- Equity-focused reforms are essential for ensuring equal learning opportunities.

3.2 Empowering Teachers and Reinventing Learning

Teachers remain central to education transformation, yet many face systemic constraints.

- Limited access to Continuous Professional Development (CPD) programs
- Insufficient support for adopting innovative pedagogies
- Overreliance on rote learning and exam-oriented teaching
- Resource scarcities and low salary scales
- Reforms are introduced without systematic capacity-building or follow-through

This underscores the need to move beyond policy formulation and prioritize effective implementation. The reforms must prioritize teacher empowerment, enabling educators to adopt student-centered and context-responsive teaching methods.

3.3 Leveraging Technology and Data for Innovation

Technology offers significant opportunities to modernize education systems, but requires strategic integration.

- Data-driven tools can support evidence-based policymaking and monitoring
- Digital platforms can expand access to quality learning resources
- However, digital divides must be addressed to prevent further inequality
- Technology should be viewed as an enabler of systemic reform, not a standalone solution.

3.4 The Tuition Economy and Assessment System

The expansion of private tuition reflects deeper systemic issues:

- Tuition is not imposed but driven by demand, due to perceived gaps and lack of innovation in school education
- It is closely tied to exam-oriented, knowledge-based assessment systems
- Urban students have significantly greater access, reinforcing inequality in the system
- It places financial and psychological burdens on families and students

Panelists emphasized that the solution is not elimination of tuition classes, but reforming the system:

- Improve quality of classroom teaching and resource allocation
- Reform assessment systems to reduce dependence on rote learning
- Encourage students to participate actively in school activities and discourage conducting private tuition classes during school hours
- Introduce innovative teaching methods in schools to create favorable learning environments for students

3.5 Governance and Funding Gaps

A central insight was that policy design alone is insufficient without governance reforms.

- **Underinvestment in education:** Public spending remains significantly below recommended levels
- **Over-centralization:** Decision-making is concentrated at the national level, limiting responsiveness and efficiency
- **Weak school-level autonomy:** Principals lack authority over staffing, incentives, and utilization of resources
- **Leadership gaps:** Shortage of trained school administrators and management capacity

There is a strong need to restructure governance systems in the education sector to improve accountability, flexibility, and efficiency. Reforms should prioritize strengthening the administrative structures of schools and educational institutions to ensure system stability and foster innovation.

4. Policy Recommendations

4.1. Institutionalize Data-Driven Decision-Making

- Develop integrated national education data systems
- Use real-time data to identify learning gaps, inform policy decisions and allocate resources effectively

4.2. Adopt Equity-Based Resource Allocation

- Shift from uniform funding models to needs-based financing
- Prioritize underserved schools and regions during the funding and resource allocation processes

4.3. Strengthen Teacher Capacity and Incentives

- Expand training programs focused on pedagogy and digital skills
- Introduce incentives for teachers serving in underprivileged areas
- Provide attractive salaries and more opportunities for growth and resilience

4.4 Scale Technology with Equity Safeguards

- Invest in digital infrastructure across all regions
- Ensure equal access to devices, connectivity, and training
- Use data systems for targeted interventions and monitoring inequities
- Use technology to enhance—not replace—teaching and learning processes

4.5. Reform Assessment Frameworks

- Move beyond exam-centric systems toward competency-based evaluation
- Use assessments to improve learning outcomes rather than ranking performance

5. Implementation Considerations

Effective reforms will depend on:

- **Governance coordination:** Strengthen collaboration between national and provincial education authorities, Sustained investment and reform continuity are essential in this regard
- **Public-private partnerships:** Leverage expertise from EdTech providers and research institutions to foster innovation
- **Capacity-building:** Teachers and administrators must be supported and empowered throughout the reform processes
- **Stakeholder engagement:** Involve teachers, administrators, students, and communities in policy design and implementation
- **Context sensitivity:** Adapt global best practices to suit Sri Lanka's socio-economic realities

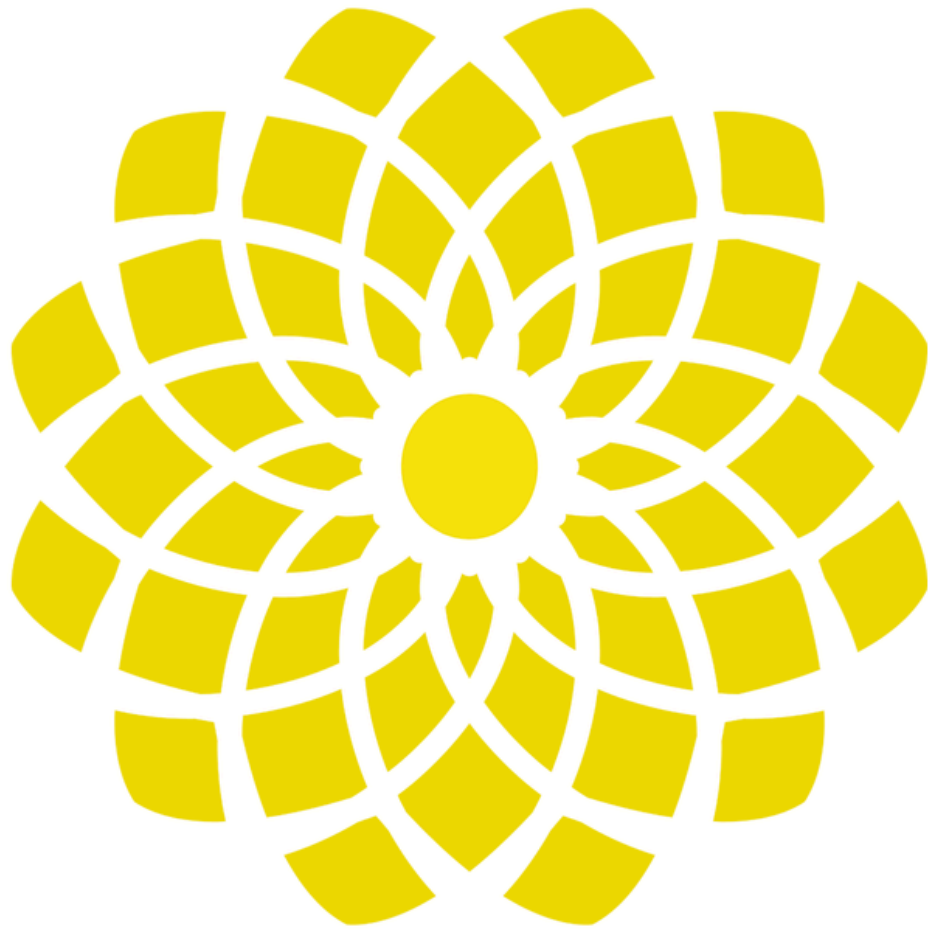
Conclusion

Sri Lanka's education system stands at a critical juncture. While foundational strengths remain, systemic inequities and evolving global demands require a shift toward innovative, inclusive, and data-driven policy approaches.

The BALPP policy dialogue highlights that meaningful reform must combine equity-focused policy interventions, strategic leadership, empowered educators, and the effective use of technology. With sustained commitment and coordinated action, Sri Lanka can build an education system that is resilient, inclusive, innovative and future-ready. Also, addressing the growing mismatch between education outcomes and global labour market requirements will be critical to ensuring that Sri Lanka's workforce remains competitive, adaptable, productive and efficient.

About the Author

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