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Beyond Enrolment: Education System Readiness for Very High Human Development in Sri Lanka - A Comparative Policy Analysis with Finland, Singapore and South Korea

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Sri Lanka has long been cited as a human development outlier, achieving near-universal school participation and gender parity at income levels far below those of its peers. Yet the country remains in the 'high' rather than 'very high' human development category, and its ranking has slipped in recent years. This paper asks whether the structure and performance of the education system supply the prerequisites and attributes needed for a transition to Very High Human Development (VHHD). It draws on a desk-based study conducted by the Marga Institute for the Gamani Corea Foundation, reanalysing secondary data from the Annual School Census, the University Grants Commission, the Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission, UNESCO and UNDP, and benchmarking Sri Lanka against Finland, Singapore and South Korea. The analysis finds that Sri Lanka's constraint is no longer access to schooling but the conversion of schooling into learning, skills and higher-level qualifications. Three binding constraints are identified: a learning-quality gap of 4.5 years between expected and learning-adjusted years of schooling; a tertiary bottleneck in which only about one in five qualified candidates secures a state university place, and the tertiary gross enrolment ratio stands near one-fifth of comparator levels; and a content-heavy curriculum and examination regime that crowds out collaboration, problem-solving and applied learning. The paper argues for a reform agenda centred on key-concept curricula, a

rehabilitated school-based assessment and project-work tradition, differentiated expansion of tertiary provision, demand-led vocational pathways and sustained public investment, and relates these proposals to the national reforms launched in 2026.

Keywords: *education, human development, skills, learning.*

INTRODUCTION

Education sits at the centre of every major account of human development. In the capability approach, it is valued both intrinsically, as a freedom in its own right, and instrumentally, as a means of expanding other freedoms such as work, political voice and health.[1] The Human Development Index (HDI) formalised this view in 1990 by placing knowledge alongside longevity and income as one of three constitutive dimensions of development.[2] For countries seeking to move from high to very high human development, the education dimension is therefore not a sectoral concern but a structural one.

Sri Lanka occupies a distinctive position in this literature. Free education from kindergarten to university, introduced in the 1940s, and decades of sustained public provision produced literacy, enrolment and gender-parity outcomes that resembled those of much richer countries.[3] By 2019, the mean years of schooling of the adult population had reached 10.6 and expected years of schooling 14.1, placing Sri Lanka at the upper edge of the high human development group.[4] However, the most recent Human Development Report places Sri Lanka 89th of 193 countries, with an HDI value of 0.776, compared with a rank of 72 reported in 2020.[5] Although changes in rank partly reflect revisions in methodology and data, the direction of travel suggests that the historical advantages of the education system are no longer sufficient on their own to carry the country into the very high category.

[1] Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (OUP 1999)
[2] *Human Development Report 1990* (United Nations Development Programme 1990); Mahbub ul Haq, *Reflections on Human Development* (OUP 2010)
[3] Angela W Little, *The Politics, Policies and Progress of Basic Education in Sri Lanka* (University of London 2010) CREATE Pathways to Access Research Monograph No 38; Nisha Arunatilake, 'Education participation in Sri Lanka—why all are not in school' (2006) 45 International Journal of Educational Research 137 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijer.2006.11.001> accessed 25 August 2026
[4] *Human Development Report 2020: The Next Frontier: Human Development and the Anthropocene* (United Nations Development Programme 2020)
[5] *Human Development Report 2025: A Matter of Choice: People and Possibilities in the Age of AI* (United Nations Development Programme 2025)

This paper examines that problem directly. It asks: *to what extent does Sri Lanka's current education system provide the prerequisites and attributes associated with Very High Human Development, and what reforms would close the remaining gaps?* The concept of VHHD used here follows the framework developed by Gunatilleke for the Marga Institute, which identifies three education-related constituents: the educational attainment of the population, participation rates in secondary and tertiary education, and the capacity to develop a knowledge-based society.[6] The paper is based on a desk study undertaken by the Marga Institute for the Gamani Corea Foundation,[7] which has been reorganised, reanalysed and updated for this article. Sri Lanka is benchmarked against three countries that have reached very high human development through different educational routes: Finland, which pursued a trust-based, low-stakes comprehensive model; Singapore, which built a meritocratic, bilingual and strongly state-steered system; and South Korea, whose rapid expansion of secondary and tertiary education accompanied one of the fastest development transitions on record.

The paper makes three contributions. First, it moves the Sri Lankan debate beyond participation indicators, which are already favourable, to the less visible question of how schooling is converted into learning, qualifications and employable skills. Second, it brings institutional features of the system, such as school size, school classification, subject-stream allocation and university admission rules, into the analysis of human development outcomes. Third, it links these findings to concrete reform options and to the national education reforms introduced from 2026. The remainder of the paper is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature. Section 3 sets out the methodology. Section 4 presents the findings, Section 5 discusses them in comparative perspective, Section 6 sets out policy recommendations, and Section 7 concludes.

[6] Godfrey Gunatilleke, 'A Vision for Sri Lanka 2025& 2035 – Pre-Requisites of Very High Human Development (Part 1)' (*Marga Institute*) <https://margasrilanka.org/a-vision-for-sri-lanka-2025-2035-pre-requisites-of-very-high-human-development-part-1/> accessed 25 August 2026

[7] Marga Institute, *Examination of the Current Education System of Sri Lanka in Relation to the Provision of Prerequisites and Attributes Concerning Very High Human Development* (unpublished report prepared for the Gamani Corea Foundation, March 2022)

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Education in Human Development and Human Capital Theory: Two broad traditions shape the way education is linked to development. Human capital theory treats schooling as an investment that raises individual productivity and earnings and, in aggregate, national output.[8] Endogenous growth models extended this reasoning by showing how the accumulation of knowledge can generate sustained growth rather than a one-off rise in income levels.[9] A large body of evidence now confirms that private returns to schooling are positive in almost every country and tend to be highest at the tertiary level in recent decades.[10]

The human development tradition places education in a wider frame. For Sen, what matters is the expansion of substantive freedoms, and education is one of the most important of these because it enlarges the set of lives a person can choose to lead. Nussbaum's list of central capabilities likewise treats the ability to use one's senses, imagination and thought 'in a truly human way' as something a just society must secure, which requires adequate education.[11] Ranis, Stewart and Ramirez show that the two traditions converge empirically: human development and economic growth reinforce each other, and countries that prioritise human development early tend to enter a 'virtuous cycle' in which gains in one area support gains in the other.[12] Sri Lanka has often been presented as an example of a country that invested in human development ahead of growth; the question now is whether the country can complete the cycle.

From Schooling to Learning: The single most important shift in the international literature over the past two decades has been the move from counting years of schooling to measuring what students actually learn. Hanushek and Woessmann show that cognitive skills, measured through international assessments, explain a far larger share of cross-country differences in long-run

[8] Theodore W Schultz, 'Investment in Human Capital' (1961) 51(1) American Economic Review 1 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1818907> accessed 25 August 2026; Gary S Becker, *Human Capital: A Theoretical and Empirical Analysis, with Special Reference to Education* (3rd edn, University of Chicago Press 1994)
[9] Robert E Lucas Jr, 'On the mechanics of economic development' (1988) 22 Journal of Monetary Economics 3 <https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-3932(88)90168-7> accessed 25 August 2026
[10] George Psacharopoulos and Harry Anthony Patrinos, 'Returns to investment in education: a decennial review of the global literature' (2018) 26(5) Education Economics 445 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09645292.2018.1484426> accessed 25 August 2026
[11] Martha C Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Belknap Press 2011)
[12] Gustav Ranis et al., 'Economic Growth and Human Development' (2000) 28 World Development 197 <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0305-750X(99)00131-X> accessed 25 August 2026

growth than years of schooling alone.[13] Pritchett's argument that 'schooling ain't learning' reached a similar conclusion from the perspective of education systems in developing countries, many of which had expanded enrolment rapidly without a matching rise in learning.[14] The World Bank's 2018 World Development Report described this as a global 'learning crisis'.[15]

A practical outcome of this literature is the Learning-Adjusted Years of Schooling (LAYS) measure, which scales expected years of schooling by the ratio of a country's harmonised test score to a benchmark of 625, the advanced international benchmark in TIMSS-type assessments.[16] A country whose students achieve the benchmark would have identical expected and learning-adjusted years; a country whose students score lower loses a proportion of its expected years. LAYS is now reported as part of the World Bank's Human Capital Index.[17] This measure is central to the argument of this paper because it separates the two components of the education dimension of human development that Sri Lanka's aggregate statistics tend to blur together: participation and learning.

Curriculum, Assessment and Twenty-First Century Skills: A second body of literature concerns what is taught and how it is assessed. Curriculum theorists have long argued that subjects are best organised around a small number of powerful ideas rather than an accumulation of discrete topics. Bruner's claim that any subject has a 'structure' of fundamental ideas that can be taught in some intellectually honest form at any stage was an early statement of this view.[18] It was later developed in the 'understanding by design' framework and in the 'big ideas' approach to science education.[19] On assessment, Black and Wiliam's review established that formative, classroom-based assessment can produce substantial learning gains, particularly

[13] Eric A Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, 'The Role of Cognitive Skills in Economic Development' (2008) 46 Journal of Economic Literature 607 <https://hanushek.stanford.edu/sites/default/files/publications/Hanushek%2BWoessmann%202008%20JEL%2046%283%29.pdf> accessed 25 August 2026; Eric A Hanushek and Ludger Woessmann, *The Knowledge Capital of Nations: Education and the Economics of Growth* (MIT Press 2015)
[14] Lant Pritchett, *The Rebirth of Education: Schooling Ain't Learning* (Center for Global Development 2013)
[15] *World Development Report 2018: Learning to Realize Education's Promise* (World Bank 2018)
[16] Deon Filmer et al., 'Learning-adjusted years of schooling (LAYS): Defining a new macro measure of education' (2020) 77 Economics of Education Review 101971 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.econedurev.2020.101971> accessed 25 August 2026
[17] *The Human Capital Index 2020 Update: Human Capital in the Time of COVID-19* (World Bank 2020)
[18] Jerome S Bruner, *The Process of Education* (Harvard University Press 1960)
[19] Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (2nd edn, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development 2005); Wynne Harlen (ed), *Principles and Big Ideas of Science Education* (Association for Science Education 2010)

for lower-achieving students.[20] In contrast, high-stakes examinations that reward recall of content are associated with narrowing of the curriculum and with the growth of private supplementary tutoring, a phenomenon that is particularly pronounced in East and South Asia.[21]

The project method has a similarly long history. Kilpatrick's 1918 essay proposed purposeful, student-directed activity as the organising unit of learning,[22] and later reviews of project-based learning have found positive effects on problem-solving, collaboration and depth of understanding when projects are well designed.[23] More recently, frameworks of 'twenty-first-century skills' have grouped these outcomes under headings such as creativity, critical thinking, communication and collaboration, and have argued that such skills are least vulnerable to automation.[24] Sri Lanka has a particularly relevant history here: a nationwide project-work programme introduced in the senior secondary curriculum in 1976 was studied by UNESCO's Asia-Pacific programme as an example of school-community learning.[25]

The Sri Lankan Evidence Base and the VHHD Framework: Research on Sri Lanka's education system has concentrated on four issues: the historical achievements of free education; the residual groups that remain outside school; the quality and equity of learning;[26] and the mismatch between higher education and labour market demand.[27] The World Bank's sector assessment concluded that Sri Lanka's main challenge had shifted from access to quality, relevance and equity. Policy commentary has also highlighted low public investment in education by international standards and the resulting constraints on tertiary expansion.

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[20] Paul Black and Dylan Wiliam, 'Assessment and Classroom Learning' (1998) 5 Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice 7 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0969595980050102> accessed 25 August 2026

[21] Mark Bray, *The Shadow Education System: Private Tutoring and Its Implications for Planners* (2nd edn, UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning 2007)

[22] William Heard Kilpatrick, *The Project Method* (1918) 19(4) Teachers College Record 319 <https://education-uk.org/documents/kilpatrick1918/index.html> accessed 25 August 2026

[23] John W Thomas, *A Review of Research on Project-Based Learning* (Autodesk Foundation 2000)

[24] Bernie Trilling and Charles Fadel, *21st Century Skills: Learning for Life in Our Times* (Jossey-Bass 2009)

[25] UNESCO Asian Programme of Educational Innovation for Development (APEID), *Work and Learning: Joint Operational Study — Project Work as a Component of the Senior Secondary Curriculum in Sri Lanka, Final Report* (UNESCO 1978)

[26] Halil Dundar et al., *Sri Lanka Education Sector Assessment: Achievements, Challenges, and Policy Options* (World Bank 2017)

[27] *Innovative Strategies in Higher Education for Accelerated Human Resource Development in South Asia: Sri Lanka* (Asian Development Bank 2016); Harsha Aturupane et al., *Sri Lanka Human Capital Development: Realizing the Promise and Potential of Human Capital* (International Development in Focus, World Bank 2021)

Gunatilleke's VHHD framework provides the analytical lens for this paper. It is distinctive in treating very high human development not as a single threshold on the HDI but as a set of prerequisites and attributes that a society must acquire. In the education domain, these include mean schooling of roughly 10 to 12 years, expected schooling close to 15 years, substantially higher participation in tertiary education, a large research and professional workforce, and a curriculum capable of producing the adaptive and creative capacities that a knowledge-based society requires. What is missing from existing work is an integrated assessment that places Sri Lanka's institutional arrangements against these prerequisites and against the pathways followed by countries that have already made the transition. This paper addresses that gap.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design: The study uses a qualitative comparative policy analysis design supported by descriptive analysis of secondary quantitative data. It was carried out in two stages. The first stage was the desk review conducted by the Marga Institute for the Gamani Corea Foundation, which assembled administrative and international data on Sri Lanka's school, university and vocational systems and reviewed policy documents, sector assessments and historical records of curriculum reform. The second stage, undertaken for this article, reorganised the material around the three VHHD constituents, recalculated indicators from the underlying tables, corrected arithmetic inconsistencies in the source compilations, and updated headline human development and investment figures using the most recent international releases.

Data Sources: The quantitative evidence draws on five main sources: the Ministry of Education's Annual School Census 2019, which provides enrolment by grade, gender, school type and school size;[28] University Grants Commission (UGC) data on university admissions and graduate output; Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission (TVEC) data on National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) certification by provider; UNESCO Institute for Statistics data on gross and net enrolment ratios; and UNDP Human Development Reports for HDI values and schooling indicators. LAYS estimates are taken from the World Bank Human Capital Index 2020 update. Qualitative evidence was drawn from national policy documents, including the reports of the National Education Commission,[29] the National Human Resources and Employment

[28] *Annual School Census Report 2019* (Ministry of Education, Sri Lanka 2020)
[29] *The First Report of the National Education Commission* (National Education Commission, Sri Lanka 1992)

Policy,[30] sector assessments by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank,[31] and documentation of the 1970s project-work programme.

Selection of Comparator Countries: The three comparator countries were selected purposively rather than statistically. South Korea and Singapore are Asian countries that moved from middle-income status to very high human development within roughly two to three decades, and both did so through deliberate expansion of secondary and tertiary education.[32] Finland was selected because it represents a different route: a high-performing system built on highly qualified teachers, limited standardised testing and a strong emphasis on equity and pupil well-being.[33] Together, the three offer realistic intermediate targets (Singapore and South Korea) and a longer-term reference model (Finland) for Sri Lankan policy.

Analytical Approach and Limitations: The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, indicators are classified according to whether Sri Lanka has already reached a level consistent with VHHD ('prerequisites achieved') or falls short ('prerequisites deficient'). Second, institutional features of the system are examined to explain the deficits. Third, comparator systems are reviewed for practices that address those deficits. The study has several limitations. It relies on secondary data, much of which predates the COVID-19 pandemic and the 2022 economic crisis, both of which disrupted schooling and public finance. Comparative indicators are drawn from different years where synchronised data were unavailable. Some enrolment ratios for comparator countries, notably Finland's secondary gross enrolment ratio above 150, reflect the inclusion of adult learners and are not directly comparable with Sri Lankan figures. Finally, the analysis is descriptive and does not attempt causal identification. The findings should therefore be read as a structured diagnosis rather than an impact estimate.

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[30] *The National Human Resources and Employment Policy for Sri Lanka* (Ministry of Labour and Trade Union Relations, Sri Lanka 2012)
[31] Innovative Strategies in Higher Education for Accelerated Human Resource Development in South Asia: Sri Lanka (n 30); *SECTOR ASSESSMENT (SUMMARY): EDUCATION (TECHNICAL AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING)* (Asian Development Bank 2018)
[32] Clark W Sorensen, 'Success and Education in South Korea' (1994) 38(1) Comparative Education Review 10 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1189287> accessed 29 September 2026; S Gopinathan, 'Globalisation, the Singapore developmental state and education policy: a thesis revisited' (2007) 5 Globalisation, Societies and Education 53 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14767720601133405> accessed 25 August 2026
[33] Pasi Sahlberg et al., *Finnish Lessons 3.0: What Can the World Learn from Educational Change in Finland?* (3rd edn, Teachers College Press 2021)

FINDINGS

Prerequisites Already Achieved: Participation and Gender Parity: The first finding is that Sri Lanka already meets, or comes close to meeting, the participation-related prerequisites of VHHD at the school level. In 2019, government schools enrolled just over 4.06 million pupils, of whom 50.3 per cent were girls (Table 1).

Around 25 percent of all pupils were in the senior secondary cycles (Grades 10 to 13), and girls formed a majority of 55.6 per cent in the collegiate grades. The number of school-age children out of school fell from 87,520 in 2011 to 9,296 in 2018.

Grade Cycle	Total Pupils	Share of total (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Primary (Grades 1–5)	1,656,441	40.8	50.7	49.3
Junior secondary (Grades 6–9)	1,359,061	33.5	50.2	49.8
Senior secondary, lower (Grades 10–11)	627,477	15.4	49.5	50.5
Senior secondary, upper (Grades 12–13)	411,161	10.1	44.4	55.6
Special education units	7,513	0.2	60.6	39.4
All cycles	**4,061,653**	**100.0**	**49.7**	**50.3**

Table 1: Enrolment in government schools by grade cycle and sex, 2019

Source: Author, based on the Ministry of Education, Annual School Census 2019. Sex shares for junior secondary recalculated from the pupil counts.

Progression through the system is also strong. Between 2017 and 2019, between 73 and 75 per cent of candidates sitting the GCE Ordinary Level (O/L) examination qualified to proceed to Advanced Level (A/L) studies, and roughly two-thirds of those sitting the A/L examination met the minimum requirements for university entry. The secondary gross enrolment ratio rose from 96.9 in 2010 to 100.3 in 2018, and the net enrolment ratio reached 91 in 2018. These figures compare favourably with those of South Korea (secondary GER of 100.3 in 2018) and are within reach of Singapore (105.8), even though Sri Lanka's income per head is a fraction of theirs. Mean years of schooling (10.8 in 2023) already sit within the 10 to 12 year range that Gunatilleke associated with VHHD, while expected years of schooling (13.1) remain below the level of around 15 years that the framework implies (Table 2).

Table 2: Human development and education indicators, Sri Lanka and comparator countries

Country	HDI rank (HDR 2020)	HDI 2019	HDI rank (HDR 2025)	HDI 2023	Expected years of schooling, 2023	Mean years of schooling, 2023	Tertiary GER, 2018
Finland	11	0.938	12	0.948	19.5	13.0	90.3
Singapore	11	0.938	13	0.946	16.7	12.0	88.9
South Korea	23	0.916	20	0.937	16.6	12.7	95.9
Sri Lanka	**72**	**0.782**	**89**	**0.776**	**13.1**	**10.8**	**19.6**

Source: Author, compiled from UNDP Human Development Reports 2020 and 2025, and UNESCO Institute for Statistics data as compiled in the Marga Institute study. GER = gross enrolment ratio. Ranks across reports are not strictly comparable owing to data revisions.

The vocational sector has also expanded rapidly. The number of NVQ certificates awarded by the four main public providers and private institutions rose from about 13,200 in 2010 to 61,150 in 2018, a more than four-and-a-half-fold increase, with the Vocational Training Authority and private providers accounting for the largest shares. In short, on the indicators most commonly used to describe education systems in development reports, Sri Lanka's performance is already consistent with that of much richer countries.

Institutional Architecture: A Large, Uneven School System: The second finding concerns the structure through which these outcomes are delivered. Sri Lanka's 10,165 government schools and roughly 246,000 teachers form a system of great internal variety. Schools are organised on a 5-4-2-2 grade structure, and are classified by the highest grades they offer. Only 1,012 schools, about 10 per cent of the total, are Type 1AB schools offering the science streams at A/L, yet these schools enrol 38.7 per cent of all pupils (Table 3). At the other end, 4,029 Type 3 schools offer primary grades only.

School type	Number of schools	Share of schools (%)	Pupils	Share of pupils (%)
Type 1AB (A/L incl. science streams)	1,012	10.0	1,570,177	38.7
Type 1C (A/L, no science streams)	1,899	18.7	1,055,562	26.0
Type 2 (up to Grade 11)	3,225	31.7	760,957	18.7
Type 3 (primary only)	4,029	39.6	674,957	16.6
Total	**10,165**	**100.0**	**4,061,653**	**100.0**

Table 3: Government schools by type and enrolment, 2019

Source: Author, based on Ministry of Education, Annual School Census 2019. Shares calculated by the author.

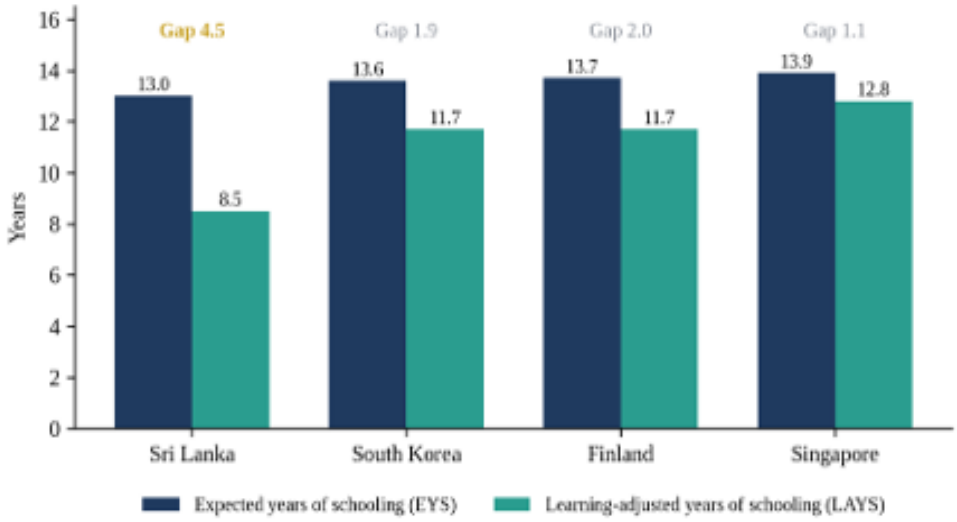
School size is an even stronger marker of inequality. A total of 2,966 schools, or 29 per cent of the total, enrol 100 pupils or fewer, and half of all schools enrol 200 or fewer; at the opposite extreme, 315 schools enrol more than 2,000 pupils. Small schools are not confined to remote communities: many exist close to large, well-resourced schools. They typically lack a full complement of qualified subject teachers and offer few co-curricular opportunities. Because science, commerce and the new technology streams at A/L are concentrated in Type 1AB schools, the school a child attends largely determines which subject pathways are available. Many students in smaller schools enter the Arts stream not by choice but because it is the only stream offered. This institutional sorting has direct consequences for the tertiary and labour-market outcomes discussed below.

Two further features of the system are significant for VHHD. The first is the growth of fee-levying international schools, which operate under commercial registration and teach in English. These schools have become an important route to overseas higher education and to globally mobile employment, but they serve a small and relatively privileged share of the population. The second is the English-medium stream introduced in state schools from around 2002, which allowed pupils to study mathematics and science in English within ordinary schools. Evidence compiled in the Marga study suggests that English-medium candidates performed better in national examinations, and the programme was taken up enthusiastically in provincial schools. Both developments show strong public demand for globally usable skills, but only the second offers a route to meeting that demand at scale within the free education system.

Deficient Prerequisites –

The Learning-quality Gap: The clearest deficit is in learning. Sri Lanka's expected years of schooling in the World Bank's Human Capital Index was 13.0, close to that of South Korea (13.6), Singapore (13.9) and Finland (13.7). However, once adjusted for learning outcomes, Sri Lanka's figure falls to 8.5 learning-adjusted years, against 11.7 in South Korea and Finland and 12.8 in Singapore (Figure 1). The gap between expected and learning-adjusted years is therefore 4.5 years in Sri Lanka, compared with between 1.1 and 2.0 years in the comparator countries. Put differently, roughly one-third of the time Sri Lankan children are expected to spend in school does not translate into learning at internationally benchmarked levels.

Figure 1: Expected versus learning-adjusted years of schooling, Sri Lanka and comparator countries



Source: Author, based on World Bank Human Capital Index 2020 data. LAYS = expected years of schooling × (harmonised test score / 625).

Subject-stream imbalance and the gender paradox: The second deficit concerns the distribution of students across A/L subject streams. In 2019, the Arts stream accounted for 43.3 per cent of the 411,161 students in Grades 12 and 13, while physical science and biological science together accounted for under 22 per cent (Table 4).

Entry to the Arts stream does not require a credit in O/L mathematics, so it serves as the default destination for students who do not meet the requirements for other streams. The newer Engineering Technology and Biosystems Technology streams, introduced to provide more applied pathways, together enrolled about 11.5 per cent of A/L students, a positive but still modest shift.

Table 4: Enrolment in GCE A/L grades by subject stream and sex, 2019

Subject stream	Students	Share of A/L students (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Arts	177,857	43.3	33.3	66.7
Commerce	82,559	20.1	48.3	51.7
Physical Science	45,765	11.1	62.4	37.6
Biological Science	44,219	10.8	29.1	70.9
Engineering Technology	30,130	7.3	86.5	13.5
Biosystems Technology	17,116	4.2	45.1	54.9
Vocational	12,199	3.0	62.2	37.8
Not specified	1,316	0.3	45.4	54.6

Source: Author, based on Ministry of Education, Annual School Census 2019. The female share for Physical Science has been recalculated from the pupil counts (the source compilation reports 17.6%).

Stream allocation interacts with gender in a way that complicates Sri Lanka's apparently strong parity record. Girls form two-thirds of the A/L Arts stream and 83.6 per cent of university entrants from the Arts stream, but only 37.6 per cent of physical science students and 13.5 per cent of Engineering Technology students. Since graduates of arts, humanities and social science faculties face the longest waits for employment and are most likely to queue for public sector jobs, female educational success is disproportionately channelled into pathways with lower labour-market returns. The gender gap in outcomes has not disappeared; it has moved from access to allocation.

The Tertiary Bottleneck: The third and most consequential deficit lies at the transition from school to higher education. Despite rising numbers of qualified candidates, state university admissions have remained restricted to around 30,000 to 35,000 a year. In the 2018/2019 intake, 167,992 candidates met the minimum requirements for university admission, but only 31,881 were admitted, an admission rate of 19 per cent (Table 5). Roughly five qualified

candidates compete for each available place. Graduate output from state universities has fluctuated between about 15,600 and 19,100 a year.

Table 5: University admission and graduate output, state universities

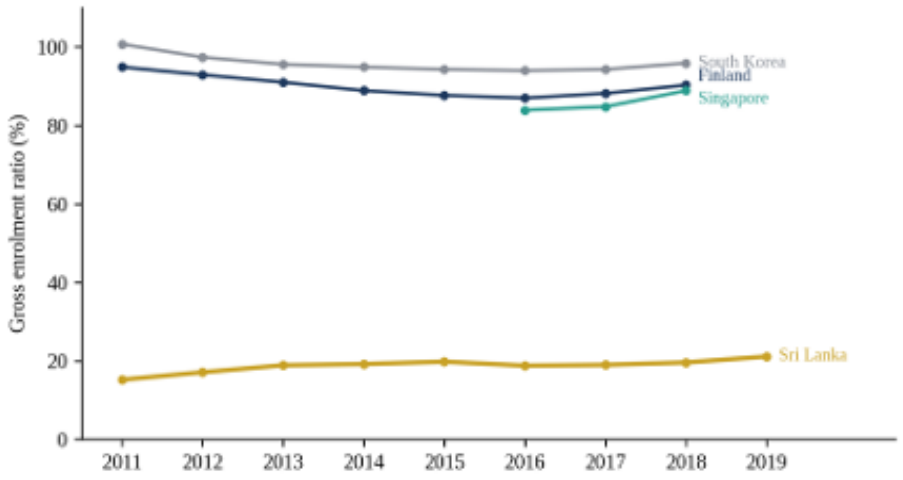
Indicator	2010/11	2015/16	2018/19
Candidates qualified for university admission	142,516	155,550	167,992
Students admitted	22,016	29,055	31,881
Admitted as % of qualified	**15.5**	**18.7**	**19.0**
Qualified candidates per place	6.5	5.4	5.3

Source: Author, based on University Grants Commission data (2015; 2020, provisional) as compiled in the Marga Institute study. Total undergraduate admissions (all routes) rose from 25,676 in 2015 to 31,902 in 2019, while graduate output ranged from 15,597 (2018) to 19,062 (2017).

The consequence is a tertiary gross enrolment ratio of 19.6 in 2018 and 21.1 in 2019, compared with ratios of 88.9 to 95.9 in the comparator countries (Figure 2). Female tertiary participation (26.0 in 2019) is consistently higher than male participation (16.2), again showing that parity-related gains at school level carry through to tertiary level but do not by themselves raise the overall ratio. The Asian Development Bank has observed that qualified students who fail to secure state university places turn to the Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education, professional bodies, private institutes and overseas universities, and that private participation in higher education has been held back by concerns that it would disadvantage low-income students. Those who can afford to study abroad often do not return; the World Bank has

listed Sri Lanka among the top South Asian countries of origin for emigrants with tertiary education.[34]

Figure 2: Tertiary gross enrolment ratio, Sri Lanka and comparator countries, 2011–2019



Source: Author, based on UNESCO Institute for Statistics data as compiled in the Marga Institute study. Gaps indicate years for which data were not reported.

Public financing lies behind this bottleneck. Government expenditure on education has historically hovered around 2 to 2.5 per cent of GDP, well below the 6 per cent target discussed by the National Education Commission,[35] and it fell to between 1.2 and 1.8 per cent of GDP during the economic crisis years of 2021 to 2023.[36] At these levels, the physical and human resources of state universities cannot expand in step with demand, and the National Human Resources and Employment Policy notes that capital and recurrent spending on higher education has been low by both international and historical standards.

Relevance and Employability: A fourth deficit concerns the relevance of what is learned. National policy documents and development partner assessments consistently report that graduates, particularly from arts, humanities, social sciences and commerce faculties, lack the

[34] *Migration and Remittances Factbook 2011* (2nd edn, World Bank 2011)
[35] Study on Investment in General Education (n 32); Jayawardena (n 32)
[36] 'Government expenditure on education, total (% of GDP)' (*World Bank*) <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.XPD.TOTL.GD.ZS?locations=LK> accessed 25 August 2026

soft skills, problem-solving ability and English proficiency that employers value. Even engineering and technology graduates have been found to need stronger interpersonal and communication skills. The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) system, although expanding, has been characterised by the World Bank as supply-driven, weakly connected to employers and to the informal sector, and fragmented across multiple public agencies. Many young people who complete A/L without entering university therefore enter the labour market with neither a tertiary qualification nor a recognised vocational skill.

Curriculum and Assessment: The final deficit lies in the curriculum itself. School curricula are revised on a fixed eight-year cycle by the National Institute of Education (NIE), and the process has concentrated on updating content and producing textbooks. The National Education Commission's first report in 1992 proposed nine national goals, ranging from social cohesion and social justice to adaptability and securing an honourable place in the international community, together with five basic competencies covering communication, environment, ethics, leisure and 'learning to learn'. According to the Marga review, these goals have had limited influence on subsequent curriculum design.

Assessment practice compounds the problem. The GCE O/L and A/L examinations are built from tables of specifications organised around lesson units, which rewards the recall of large volumes of topic-specific content and sustains a large private tutoring market. School-based assessment (SBA), introduced for O/L in 1989 and later revised and extended, was intended to reward sustained work, practical skills and group projects, but it has been progressively downgraded. The effect is a system in which collaboration between students, one of the core skills of a knowledge economy, is treated in the examination hall as misconduct.

Comparative Insights from Finland, Singapore and South Korea –

Table 6 summarises the features of the comparator systems that are most relevant to the deficits identified above.

Dimension	Finland	Singapore	South Korea	Implication for Sri Lanka
Structure and pathways	9-year comprehensive school; flexible general and vocational upper secondary tracks	Subject-based banding; junior colleges, polytechnics and ITE as parallel routes	6-3-3 system; academic and vocational high schools feeding colleges and universities	Create multiple respected post-O/L and post-A/L routes
Teachers	Master's degree required for all teachers; high professional autonomy	Centrally planned, well-resourced teacher training	Subject specialists from junior secondary level	Invest in teacher qualifications and deployment to small schools
Assessment	Descriptive assessment in early grades; one matriculation examination	High-stakes, but broad co-curricular recognition	Examination-driven, with reforms towards broader learning	Rebalance examinations towards key concepts; restore SBA
Curriculum emphasis	Phenomenon-based, multidisciplinary modules since 2016	Bilingual; breadth required for university entry	'Humanity education' and global citizenship reforms	Key-concept curricula, project work and wider subject choice
Tertiary GER, 2018	90.3	88.9	95.9	Sri Lanka: 19.6

Source: Author, based on the Marga Institute study and the comparative literature on Finland, Singapore and South Korea.[37]

Finland shows that high learning outcomes can be achieved without heavy reliance on external examinations. Primary and secondary teachers must hold master's degrees, schools have considerable freedom over teaching methods and materials, and pupils receive largely descriptive assessment in the early grades. The national curriculum framework introduced in 2016 requires schools to include multidisciplinary, 'phenomenon-based' learning modules alongside subject teaching, specifically to develop transversal competences such as collaboration and critical thinking. The upper secondary stage allows flexible movement between general and vocational tracks, and holders of vocational qualifications may proceed to universities of applied sciences or universities.

Singapore illustrates a different combination. The system is strongly meritocratic and examination-oriented, but its expansion of post-secondary provision through junior colleges, polytechnics and the Institute of Technical Education has created multiple, respected routes into the labour market and into higher education. English is the medium of instruction from primary school, giving all students access to global knowledge and employment, while mother-tongue learning is maintained. Subject-based banding allows students to study individual subjects at different levels of difficulty rather than being placed in a single track for all subjects, and university admission requires breadth, with science students also taking a humanities subject and vice versa. Co-curricular participation is compulsory at secondary level and is formally recognised in admission to further study.

South Korea demonstrates the development payoff of rapid tertiary expansion. Enrolment at secondary and tertiary levels rose rapidly from the 1960s, driven by intense household demand for education and by state policy linking education to industrial development. Today, almost every young Korean completes upper secondary education, and the tertiary gross enrolment ratio is close to 100. The Korean case also shows the costs of an exclusively examination-driven model, including heavy private tutoring and student stress, which have prompted repeated

[37] Marga Institute (n 7); Sahlberg (n 44); David Hogan, 'Why is Singapore's school system so successful, and is it a model for the West?' (*The Conversation*, 11 February 2014) <https://theconversation.com/why-is-singapores-school-system-so-successful-and-is-it-a-model-for-the-west-22917> accessed 26 August 2026; Michael J Seth, *Education Fever: Society, Politics, and the Pursuit of Schooling in South Korea* (University of Hawai'i Press 2002)

efforts since the 1990s to introduce 'humanity education', global citizenship and more open-ended learning.

Taken together, the comparators suggest that the distinguishing feature of VHHD systems is not the level of school enrolment, which Sri Lanka already matches, but three institutional capacities: the ability to convert time in school into high levels of learning; the capacity to provide tertiary and post-secondary opportunities to most of the age cohort; and curricula and assessment systems designed to develop transferable skills alongside subject knowledge.

DISCUSSION

The central argument emerging from these findings is that Sri Lanka's education system has solved the problem that defined the first phase of its human development success, namely access, but has not yet solved the problems that define the second phase: learning, progression to higher levels of education, and relevance. The participation-based indicators in the HDI, which reward years of schooling, understate the scale of this challenge, which is why Sri Lanka can appear close to the VHHD threshold on some measures while its overall ranking has declined.

The learning-quality gap is consistent with the international literature on the difference between schooling and learning. If cognitive skills rather than years of schooling drive long-run growth, then a 4.5-year gap between expected and learning-adjusted schooling represents a substantial loss of economic potential as well as of individual capability. In Sri Lanka, the gap is closely linked to the institutional unevenness described in Section 4.2. A system in which half of all schools enrol fewer than 200 pupils and science-stream provision is concentrated in one-tenth of schools will inevitably produce uneven learning outcomes, and the national average conceals wide differences between large urban schools and small rural and estate-sector schools.

The tertiary bottleneck is, in effect, a policy choice embedded in the financing model. By restricting fee-free state university places to a fixed number, and by being cautious about private provision, the system protects equity at the point of entry to state universities but at the expense of equity in overall access to tertiary education. Qualified students from wealthier families can buy places in private and overseas institutions; qualified students from poorer families often cannot. The persistence of A/L candidates who repeat the examination in order to improve their chances of university entry shows how strong the demand for higher education remains. The

comparator cases suggest that expansion does not need to follow a single model: South Korea relied heavily on private institutions, Singapore on a differentiated public sector, and Finland on two parallel public university sectors. What they share is a commitment to making some form of tertiary education available to the majority of the cohort.

The gender findings deserve particular emphasis. Sri Lanka's gender parity in school enrolment and female majority at A/L and in universities are genuine achievements. Yet the concentration of young women in the Arts stream, and their under-representation in physical science and engineering technology, means that educational success is not translating into equivalent labour-market outcomes. This helps explain why high female educational attainment has not been matched by comparable gains in women's labour market outcomes, and suggests that stream-allocation rules, mathematics preparation and the availability of science streams in girls' schools and small schools should be treated as gender policy issues, not only as education policy issues.

The curriculum and assessment findings connect these problems. A content-heavy, examination-driven system encourages rote learning, sustains private tutoring and pushes students with weaker mathematics results into streams with limited returns. It also leaves little space for the collaborative, applied and problem-solving learning that is emphasised in the literature on twenty-first-century skills and that was, notably, a central feature of Sri Lanka's own project-work programme in the 1970s. The UNESCO study of that programme recorded more than 1,000 school projects involving around 20,000 pupils in their first year, including a community health project in a low-income neighbourhood of Dehiwela that coincided with large reductions in recorded cases of typhoid, hepatitis and cholera, and an irrigation project in Kandy that brought an additional 65 acres of paddy land into cultivation. Whatever the precise attribution of these outcomes, the experience demonstrates that school-community project work can operate at national scale in Sri Lanka, including in poorly resourced schools, and that it can be assessed within the national examination framework.

Finally, the findings bear directly on the national education reforms announced in 2025 under the theme ‘Transform Education: Transform Sri Lanka’. The reforms introduce activity-based learning in the primary grades, a modular and credit-based structure with new subjects such as ICT, ‘technology for life’ and entrepreneurship and financial literacy at junior secondary level,

earlier vocational options, and revised O/L examinations from 2029.[38] New Grade 1 curricula were introduced in 2026, while the Grade 6 roll-out was deferred to 2027 following public controversy over learning materials.[39] The reform direction is broadly consistent with the diagnosis presented here. However, the analysis in this paper suggests that curriculum change will deliver VHHD-relevant gains only if it is accompanied by assessment reform, investment in teachers and small schools, and a substantial expansion of tertiary opportunity. Without these, a more modern curriculum risks leading into the same bottleneck at the end of A/L.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Drawing on the findings and comparative evidence, six sets of recommendations are proposed. They are ordered from school-level to system-level interventions, but they are intended as a mutually reinforcing package.

Reorganise Curricula around key Concepts and Competencies: Each subject should be scoped around a limited number of key concepts and 'big ideas', such as the laws of motion in physics, atomic theory and chemical combination in chemistry, or evolution and heredity in biology, with other content organised around them. The 1992 national goals and basic competencies should be reviewed and used explicitly as design criteria, and the VHHD-relevant attributes to be developed at primary, junior secondary, O/L and A/L levels should be specified.

Reform Summative Examinations and Rehabilitate School-based Assessment: O/L and A/L examinations should test understanding and application of key concepts across a subject, rather than sampling lesson units, to reduce the premium on rote learning and private tutoring. A uniform, credible SBA scheme should be reinstated as a formal component of certification, recording sustained work, practical skills and group projects. The practice of recording a named group project on the A/L certificate should be restored so that employers and universities can recognise it.

[38] *Transform Education: Transform Sri Lanka — Education Reform Initiatives* (Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education, Sri Lanka 2025)
[39] Charumini de Silva, 'Grade 6 education reforms differed to 2027 after textbook controversy' *Daily FT* (14 January 2026) <https://www.ft.lk/front-page/Grade-6-education-reforms-differed-to-2027-after-textbook-controversy/44-786929> accessed 25 August 2026

Mainstream Project Work and Field-based learning: Building on the 1976 programme and the On-site Environmental Field Studies Centres developed since the 1970s, every A/L student should complete at least one substantial, multidisciplinary group project based on a real community problem during the course. Similar approaches should be extended to junior secondary grades and to universities, where group project work can complement lecture-based teaching.

Widen Subject Choice and Strengthen Mathematics: Admission rules should require two A/L subjects related to the intended university course, with a free choice for the third, as is common internationally and as most Sri Lankan universities agreed in principle in 2005. In parallel, mathematics teaching in junior secondary and O/L grades should be strengthened, and science and technology streams should be extended to more schools, including girls' schools and rural schools, through clustering and shared-teacher arrangements.

Expand and differentiate Tertiary Education: State university places should be expanded, combined with the mission differentiation proposed by the World Bank, in which some universities focus on research and innovation, others on excellence in teaching, and others on regional development and community engagement. Regulated, quality-assured private and transnational provision should be allowed to grow, supported by an expanded interest-free loan scheme for students from low-income households, and the Open University and distance-learning routes should be enlarged. Stronger university–industry links, through mechanisms such as University Business Linkage cells, should be used to align programmes with labour-market demand in areas such as information technology and health.

Make TVET demand-led and Sustain Public Investment: An empowered, cross-ministerial skills council representing public and private providers, employers and planners should coordinate the TVET system, as recommended by the World Bank, with clear progression routes from NVQ Levels 5 to 7 into degree-level study. Public expenditure on education should be restored and raised on a clear trajectory towards the levels recommended by the National Education Commission, with priority given to teacher quality, small and disadvantaged schools, and tertiary expansion.

CONCLUSION

Sri Lanka's education system has taken the country a long way towards the education-related prerequisites of Very High Human Development. Near-universal school participation, gender parity, high progression to upper secondary education and a mean schooling level already within the VHHD range are significant achievements for a lower-middle-income country. However, this paper shows that the remaining gaps are neither minor nor purely quantitative. A 4.5-year gap between expected and learning-adjusted schooling, a tertiary gross enrolment ratio at around one-fifth of comparator levels, a subject-stream structure that directs many students, especially young women, into pathways with weak labour-market returns, and a curriculum and examination regime that discourages collaborative and applied learning together constitute the binding constraints on further progress.

The comparative evidence from Finland, Singapore and South Korea points to a common lesson despite their different routes: countries reach very high human development when their education systems turn schooling into learning, open post-secondary and tertiary opportunities to most young people, and cultivate the adaptive capacities of a knowledge-based society. For Sri Lanka, the reforms launched in 2026 provide an opening to pursue this agenda, but only if curriculum renewal is matched by assessment reform, investment in teachers and schools, and a decisive expansion of tertiary provision. Future research should use post-pandemic learning assessment data and household surveys to examine how the economic crisis has affected learning and tertiary access, and should evaluate the effects of the new modular curriculum on learning outcomes and on stream choice, particularly for girls and for students in small schools.