

Sri Lankan government pushes university privatisation

Kapila Fernando
24 July 2010

The Sri Lankan government is pressing ahead with plans to open university education up to private businesses as a means of further cutting public spending. Perversely, ministers and the media point to the deterioration of public education—caused by successive Colombo governments—to argue that only the private sector can solve the problem.

A report released by the National Education Commission (NEC) entitled “National policy framework on higher education and technical and vocational education” late last month set out the government’s approach. It pointed to the worsening conditions in schools and universities, including the inequality between rural and urban schools, the inadequacy of university facilities and unemployment among graduates.

The report pointed out that 85 percent of those who qualified and 58 percent of those who sat admission exams were unable to secure a university place in 2006. “Despite near-universal enrolments at the primary level, rich and poor gaps in secondary and tertiary enrolments and rising private tuition usage suggest that children of low income families are at a disadvantage in gaining admission to higher education,” it stated.

What is needed is a huge injection of funds into public education at all levels. But the NEC report, while calling for modest increases of government funding, focuses on the promotion of “public-private partnership in higher education” and the creation of “an environment that facilitates non state sector participation in higher education.”

President Mahinda Rajapakse has already made clear that his government intends to slash not increase education spending. In line with the demands of the International Monetary Fund, the recent budget outlined plans to cut the deficit sharply to 8 percent of

GDP this year. Government’s expenditure on education has already fallen from 2.67 percent of GDP in 2006 to 2.08 percent in 2009. No increases were announced in the 2010 budget brought down last month.

The NEC report declared: “[T]he problem of funding or finding necessary funds to meet the requirements of an ever-expanding higher education system is seen in many countries.” It then added that the notion that the “state alone should bear the entire financial responsibility for higher education” is not accepted now. So to employ graduates and provide extra places for students private investment should be sought.

The NEC, which operates under the Sri Lankan president, is simply providing a rationale for the government’s austerity measures. The budget brought down on June 29 declared: “The government proposes to build partnership with private sector to facilitate students who qualify to enter universities but do not get a placement ... due to limited openings.”

The claim that such measures will help poor students is a fraud, however. Private universities charge exorbitant fees. The yearly tuition fees, for instance, for a diploma part two in the arts section at the Sri Lankan institution affiliated with the Australian Monash College amount to \$US4,000 or more than 450,000 rupees—well over a year’s wages for even well-paid workers in Sri Lanka.

The Australian College of Business and Technology charges an average of 240,000 rupees per year just for the Foundation Program of Business/Computer Science. The Asian Information Technology and Management (SAITM) has established a private medical college in collaboration with the Russian Nizhny Novgorod Medical Academy in Sri Lanka that charges 6 million rupees for its four-year course.

Moreover, even if wealthier students go to private

institutions that will not create more places in public universities. The growth of private education will be paralleled by the continuing rundown of public education creating a two class system—quality institutions for those who can afford to pay, and rundown, overcrowded and underfunded state-run universities for those who even get a place.

Higher Education Minister, S.B. Dissanayake, bluntly explained the real purpose of the policy in an interview on July 18 in the state-owned *Sunday Observer*. “We can save plenty of foreign exchange and also earn by promoting these universities to attract more foreign students,” he enthused. “According to my estimation if we start 15 to 20 world-class universities here, our main money spinner would be the higher education within the next 10 years. This is my target.”

Dissanayake’ plans to use the cheap labour of unemployed university graduates to create a lucrative new private university industry in Sri Lanka are unlikely to come to fruition in what is already a cutthroat global market. What is certain, however, is that public university education will continue to deteriorate as the government slashes funding in line with austerity measures that are being implemented around the world.

Public education was massively expanded in Sri Lanka after World War II in response to the rising struggles of the working class. Its decline has been bound up with the implementation of a pro-market agenda that intensified as the United National Party launched its communal war on the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983.

Successive governments have made major inroads into public education, allowing private institutions and fee-paying courses in state-run universities. Now, amid a deep economic crisis, the Rajapakse government is preparing a frontal assault, using the police-state methods developed in the course of the protracted civil war. Last year and early this year, the government used the police to violently attack student protests.

Without an independent political fight against the government based on socialist policies, public education cannot be defended and improved. But this is precisely what the leaders of the current student

organisations seek to prevent in protests that erupted last week at the Peradeniya and Kelaniya universities.

The Inter University Student Federation (IUSF), for instance, insists that government policy can be changed by student pressure. IUSF leader Udul Premaratna told the media that his organisation was going to launch a “public awareness campaign”, followed by demonstrations and boycotts of lectures. He explained: “A hunger strike will be the next if the government turns a blind eye to the protests.”

The IUSF is affiliated to the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), a Sinhala chauvinist party that backed Rajapakse’s election, his renewed war against the LTTE, all of the military’s abuses of democratic rights and insisted that students and workers had to sacrifice for the war effort. Now in political opposition to the government, the IUSF and the JVP have no intention of leading a political fight against Rajapakse or challenging its pro-market policies.

The IUSF is organising these limited protests to let off steam and to exploit the discontent and anger among students to try to revive its own battered credentials. The JVP is formally allied with ex-general Sarath Fonseka who stood as the joint opposition candidate in presidential elections in January. Fonseka is now under arrest under trumped up charges, but he made clear in the course of the campaign that he would ruthlessly implement the demands of big business.

The International Students for Social Equality (ISSE) urge university students to reject this bogus protest campaign. Students can only fight for their rights by helping to build a political movement of the working class, independent of all factions of the ruling class, to fight for a workers’ and farmers’ government to implement socialist policies. Billions of rupees must be allocated to establish free, high quality education for all from the primary level through to university education. That is what the ISSE, the student wing of the Socialist Equality Party, stands for.



To contact the WSW and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)