

Youth Skills Development: Challenges and Opportunities

Polwatte, Ajith¹, De Silva, W. Indralal²

¹ Tertiary and Vocational Education Commission

² Department of Demography, University of Colombo

Indralald37@gmail.com

This research paper explores the challenges and opportunities in skills development sector of Sri Lanka with some appropriate strategies to make the skills development sector more responsive to the needs of developing Sri Lanka. Youth skills development in any country is regarded as one of the vital areas as they soon become part of the labour force and then become drivers of the economy. Young persons who join the labour force annually, seeking employment in the Sri Lankan economy require skills for jobs within the country and overseas. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector of the country bears the responsibility for developing the skills of the youth, for work in demand in industry sectors. Current addition of youth seeking work is larger than the TVET sector output which necessitates the need of expanding the TVET sector to be able to absorb an increased part of youth population for skills development programs.

Sri Lanka economy is in a transition from a factor driven economy to an efficiency driven economy which requires bringing reforms to existing TVET policy and practice to make the skills sector more responsive to dynamic labour market needs. Efficiency driven economies deploy systems that emphasize increased productivity thus requiring innovations in existing systems and introduction of new systems. This necessitates the skills development sector to shift towards more technological areas enabling youth, working in advance production and manufacturing systems. As trained persons find work in reasonably shorter time, the dropout rate of courses could also be reduced.

Over the past two decades, employment generation in the Sri Lankan economy was not sufficient for those who join labour force annually. The country was not able to expand industries due to lack of investments from both local and foreign investors. This phenomenon paved way for formation and promotion of an informal economy which lacks social security, employment security and work security. Consequently,

small and medium size firms expanded considerably which need skills interventions in order to improve productivity and maintain sustainability. At present 60-65 per cent of the work force in Sri Lanka has been identified as working in the self-employed sector.

National Vocational Qualifications system as the national competency certification system has been in place over the past decade and is in consolidation towards more technological areas at higher qualification levels. This underpins an economic shift creating more opportunities for young persons to gain skills to be able to find employment in local and foreign job markets. The key for success is skills and availability of work for new entrants to the labour force. The Government in recognition of the need is engaged in investment promotion drive in association with developing Asian giants. The NVQ system was further strengthened by equating NVQ level 3 and 4 with General Certificate of Education Ordinary Level and Advanced Level respectively which is a marked policy intervention by the Government for promotion of skills development sector. This necessitates the TVET sector to be responsive with right set of policies and strategies in order to attract young persons who leave school for skills development programs in demand of occupational areas.

Key words: *Skills, Employment, Productivity, Innovations, Youth.*