# Sri Lankan Education: A Strong Social Foundation Facing New Constraints

From universal access and literacy to learning recovery, equity and productive opportunity

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**Direct answer.** Sri Lanka retains one of South Asia's strongest educational foundations: free public education, widespread schooling and a 2024 literacy rate of 93.3 percent among people aged ten and over, rising to about 99 percent among ages 10–24. Yet access no longer describes the full system. The 2024 school census recorded 10,076 government schools, 3.82 million students and 238,506 teachers, but resources and learning are unevenly distributed. After long pandemic closures and the economic crisis, a Ministry-led assessment cited by UNICEF found that 85 percent of Grade 3 children did not meet minimum literacy and numeracy proficiency in 2023. Public university places remain limited relative to qualified demand, while external and distance study carry a large load. Recovery requires foundational-learning assessment and support, equitable teacher deployment, nutrition and transport protection, inclusive education, stronger technical and tertiary pathways, and finance that preserves quality during fiscal adjustment.

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# 1 Historical foundation and current question

Free public education and wide schooling created high literacy and participation. The policy question has shifted from access alone to learning, equity, resilience, tertiary capacity and connection to productive opportunity.

# 2 System scale and literacy

The 2024 census counted 10,076 government schools, 3.82 million students and 238,506 teachers. Labour-force data show 93.3 percent literacy for ages ten and over and about 99 percent among young cohorts. Definitions and cohort effects must remain visible.

# 3 Learning loss and recovery

A Ministry-led Grade 3 assessment reported in 2023 found 85 percent below minimum literacy and numeracy proficiency. Pandemic closures and crisis disruption were extensive. Recovery requires diagnostic assessment, structured support and teacher development rather than grade repetition alone.

# 4 Household crisis and education

Fuel, food and material costs affected transport, attendance, nutrition and concentration. Meals and shock-responsive social protection are educational inputs because they maintain participation and cognitive conditions.

# 5 Teachers and classroom practice

Aggregate staffing hides subject and geographic shortages. Deployment, professional support and formative pedagogy matter. Examination systems should preserve standards while reducing incentives for narrow teaching and unequal tutoring.

# 6 Equity, language and disability

Estate, rural, conflict-affected and poor communities experience layered disadvantages. Home-language provision, second-language opportunity, accessible infrastructure, assistive technology and specialist support turn formal access into participation.

# 7 Secondary and tertiary pathways

Technical and academic routes need bridges and credible qualifications. Public internal university capacity is scarce, while external and distance modes enrol many students under different conditions. Outcomes should be assessed separately.

## 8 Research, work and migration

Laboratories, academic freedom, doctoral capacity and industry links support knowledge and employment. Skilled migration can bring networks and remittances while weakening service capacity, demanding workforce and diaspora policies.

## 9 Finance and accountability

Low public spending and fiscal stress threaten quality. A transparent dashboard should link budgets to attendance, proficiency, teacher deployment, inclusion, completion, tertiary demand and graduate trajectories with consistent definitions.

## 10 Evidence assessment

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| Strong | Sri Lanka has achieved high literacy and a wide public-school network. |
| Strong | Pandemic closures and the economic crisis caused major disruption and learning loss. |
| Strong | Learning, staffing and resources vary substantially across regions and social groups. |
| Strong | Internal public university capacity is limited relative to qualified demand. |
| Probable | Sustained learning recovery, meals and targeted teacher support can prevent much crisis-related loss from becoming permanent. |
| Contested | The optimal balance among examinations, curriculum reform, public provision, private study, vocational routes and university expansion. |
| Unsupported | The claim that high literacy or enrolment alone proves uniformly high education quality. |

## 11 Conclusion

Sri Lanka's educational legacy remains a powerful foundation, but inherited access cannot substitute for current learning. The system must recover foundational skills, protect children from household shocks, place teachers where needed, make inclusion practical and widen credible post-school pathways. Transparent measures of proficiency, completion and opportunity will preserve the social achievement more effectively than relying on historical reputation.

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This paper is an evidence review for public scholarship.

Corrections: info@indusvalley.org.