

**DEMOCRATIC SOCIALIST REPUBLIC OF SRI LANKA**

Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education

## **PROGRESS REPORT**

### **National Policy on Higher (Tertiary) Education of Sri Lanka**

Prepared by

National Committee on Higher Education Policy Development

Date: 05 March 2026

## **Executive Summary**

The Government proposes to carry out extensive reforms to Tertiary Education to improve access, enhance teaching-learning processes, and strengthen research capacity towards national transformation. The National Committee on Higher Education Policy Development (NCHEPD) has been tasked with producing recommendations for such reform by addressing existing gaps and shortcomings while formulating a new vision for the tertiary education sector by considering challenges emerging from technological advancements and political and socioeconomic transformations both locally and globally.

This Progress Report includes:

- The Sectoral Landscape Analysis
- The Guiding principles for policy reform
- Outcomes of academic and stakeholder consultations
- Thematic discussions of the Committee and key findings
- Potential pillars and preliminary policy directions

The Committee recognizes that tertiary education reform must respond to technological advancement, socioeconomic transformation, and evolving national priorities while safeguarding equity, academic freedom, and democratic values.

### **1. Background and Rationale**

Sri Lanka's tertiary education system, encompassing State Universities, Non-State Higher Education Institutions (NSHEIs), Transnational Education (TNE) providers, and the Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector, requires systemic reform to meet contemporary national and global demands.

Key challenges identified include:

- Limited Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) relative to demand
- Fragmented governance and regulatory structures
- Inconsistent quality assurance mechanisms
- Weak articulation between vocational and academic pathways
- Insufficient research funding and commercialization mechanisms
- Digital transformation gaps
- Graduate employability concerns

A holistic, unified policy framework is therefore necessary.

### **2. Mandate of the National Committee**

The Committee has been tasked with:

- Reviewing the current tertiary education landscape
- Identifying systemic gaps and shortcomings

- Recommending structural, regulatory, and legislative reforms
- Proposing a unified vision for tertiary education
- Ensuring alignment with broader national education reforms

### **3. The Process Undertaken by the National Committee**

Over the past six months (September 2025 – March 2026), the National Committee on Higher Education Policy Development (NCHEPD) has undertaken a structured and evidence-based process to inform the development of the National Higher (Tertiary) Education Policy. The following activities were completed:

#### **3.1 A Review of Historical Higher Education Policy Trajectory**

The Committee reviewed the evolution of national higher education policies pursued by successive governments from the British colonial period onwards. This review enabled the identification of:

- Policy continuities and discontinuities
- Structural reforms introduced over time
- Persistent systemic challenges
- Lessons from past reform efforts

This historical analysis provided the main critical context for contemporary reform proposals.

#### **3.2 A Commissioned Study on the Current Higher Education Landscape**

The Committee commissioned the Institute of Policy Studies of Sri Lanka to conduct a rapid survey and analytical report on the current Higher Education (HE) landscape in Sri Lanka.

The study examined:

- Institutional distribution and enrolment patterns
- Gross Enrolment Ratio trends
- Public–private sector participation
- Financing patterns
- Research output indicators
- Regulatory and governance structures

Findings from this report informed thematic prioritization and policy framing for this current offer.

#### **3.3 In-Person Stakeholder Consultations**

The Committee conducted structured in-person consultations as follows:

### **3.3.1 Academic and Institutional Representatives (October 22, 2025)**

Participants included representation from:

- Academic staff and administrators in state universities
- Non-State Higher Education Institutions with degree awarding status
- Institutions offering Transnational Education (TNE)
- Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions

These consultations focused on governance reform, quality assurance, research capacity, funding constraints, and qualification mobility.

### **3.3.2 Owners of Non-State Higher Education Institutions (October 09, 2025)**

A stakeholder consultation was held on October 09, 2025, with the participation of owners and senior leadership of twelve privately owned Degree Awarding Institutions (DAIs). Members of the NCHEPD and officials from the Ministry of Education, Higher Education, and Vocational Education also attended the meeting.

The consultation provided an opportunity for representatives of the non-state higher education sector to share their institutional visions for the next decade and to outline policy reforms required to support the sustainable development of the sector.

Key themes that emerged from the discussion included:

- Public–Private Collaboration and Resource Sharing
- Policy and Regulatory Framework
- Internationalization and Student Mobility
- Financial Sustainability and Institutional Models
- Student Protection and Sector Stability

### **3.3.3 Student Representatives (December 18, 2025)**

Participants included representatives from:

- State Universities
- Non-State HEIs with degree awarding status
- TNE institutions
- TVET institutions

Discussions centered on access, equity, employability concerns, quality of teaching, student welfare, and institutional accountability.

## **3.4 Public Online Consultation**

The Committee is developing a structured questionnaire to conduct an online consultation, providing members of the public an opportunity to express their views regarding:

- The current status of higher education in Sri Lanka
- Perceived systemic gaps
- Expectations from the reforms
- Future priorities

It is expected that this process will enhance transparency and broaden democratic participation in policy formulation.

### **3.5 Consensus on Guiding Principles**

Following the initial consultations and deliberations, the Committee reached consensus regarding the guiding principles to be adopted in developing a detailed policy and implementation strategy. The guiding principles presented below form the normative foundation upon which the proposed reforms are envisioned and will be developed:

- Alignment with proposed reforms in General Education, including the increased emphasis on vocational training and technical education.
- Commitment to enhance the social acceptance of vocational training and technical education as an attractive career option for students.
- Continued strong commitment to supporting free higher education in state institutions, while facilitating and regulating different types of institutions.
- Support and enhance teaching and learning in the tertiary education sector. Maintaining a democratic ethos and fair working conditions for academic staff within tertiary educational institutions to be prioritized. Teaching to be recognized for promotion.
- Commitment to high-quality, independent, and high impact research programs and innovation within the tertiary education sector that takes into consideration national priorities.
- Greater support for regional tertiary institutions to address regional/local needs and disparities.
- Ensure inclusivity, flexibility and equity in access to tertiary education and strengthen access to lifelong tertiary education.
- Commitment to a unified National Qualifications Framework that encompasses higher education as well as technical and vocational education & training, and facilitates mobility across these subsectors.
- Development of a new framework for quality assurance, accreditation standards and quality enhancement, that takes into account current national and international

criticisms of quality assurance processes and provides space for enhancement of curriculum design, teaching, and research quality, and community engagement.

- Commitment to education and research that is not necessarily tied to the goal of employability of graduates and the market, but includes the future well-being of citizens, the environment, and the preservation of democracy.
- Community engagement by tertiary educational institutions should be prioritized.

### **3.6 Identification of Thematic Policy Areas**

Based on issues identified during stakeholder consultations, review of the literature, and evidence gathered through commissioned studies, the Committee identified core thematic areas around which the policy is to be developed. These include governance, regulation, financing, research, digital transformation, access and equity, and qualification harmonization.

#### **3.6.1 Thematic Subcommittees**

To ensure depth, technical rigor, and feasibility of implementation, the Committee appointed subcommittees to articulate policy proposals and implementation strategies for the following thematic areas:

##### **Governance and Regulation**

Governance and regulation of HE and TVET sectors, including Qualification frameworks, Quality Assurance, and Accreditation of institutions and programs of study

##### **Funding and Financial Sustainability**

Funding of higher education, financial sustainability, and resource mobilization mechanisms.

##### **Research, Innovation, and Technology Transfer**

Strengthening research ecosystems, innovation frameworks, commercialization mechanisms, and national technology transfer systems. This subcommittee was established based on a specific recommendation made by the Parliamentary Subcommittee on Higher Education.

## **4. Key Thematic Findings and Emerging Policy Directions**

### **4.1 Governance and Autonomy**

- Shift from centralized pre-approval systems to post-monitoring frameworks
- Greater autonomy at faculty and departmental levels
- Streamlined approval for international collaborations
- Establishment of a national grievance/Ombudsman mechanism

- Development of national regulations addressing harassment and discrimination in HEIs

#### **4.2 Quality Assurance Reform**

- Establishment of an Independent National Quality Assurance and Accreditation Authority
- Harmonization of QA across state and non-state sectors
- Adoption of international benchmarks
- Digital QA systems to reduce administrative burden of academics

#### **4.3 Unified Qualifications Framework**

- Amalgamation of SLQF and NVQF
- Expansion of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) pathways
- Strengthening credit transfer systems within and between HEIs
- Enabling multiple entry and exit pathways, with opportunities for mobility across HE and TVET sectors

#### **4.4 Access and Equity**

- Target and expansion of Gross Enrollment Rate (GER) in Tertiary Education to 40–50% by 2036 (minimum 30%)
- Expansion of the Open and Distance Learning sector
- Bridging programs to enable horizontal migration between vocational and academic streams
- Policies supporting students with disabilities
- Strengthening regional HEIs and TVET institutions

#### **4.5 Financing and Sustainability**

- Increased public investment
- Performance-based funding
- Interest-free student loan models
- Corporate tax incentives for research contributions
- Clear policy framework for the administration of generated funds

#### **4.6 Digital Transformation**

- Universal digital infrastructure
- National higher education data platform
- Digital systems for verification of qualifications and credentials
- National AI policy for tertiary education
- Paperless and integrated administrative systems

#### **4.7 Research and Innovation**

- Dedicated research time within academic workload frameworks
- Establishment of research cadres
- Industry research parks
- Simplification of commercialization processes for research products and processes
- National Research and Innovation Fund

#### **4.8 Non-State and Transnational Education**

- A Single regulatory QA body
- Legal mandate for the regulation of TNE
- Ensuring equivalency of foreign and local degrees
- Safeguards against exploitative and profit-driven models in non-state HEIs
- Facilitation of formal state–non-state HEI collaborations

#### **4.9 Cross-Cutting Strategic Pillars**

- Access and Equity Expansion
- Governance Reform and Greater Autonomy
- A Unified Qualifications Framework
- Transformation of Quality Assurance
- A Research and Innovation Framework and Mechanism
- Financial Sustainability
- Digital Transformation
- Internationalization and Global Engagement, including integration of environmental policies into higher education
- Community Engagement and Democratic Ethos

#### **4.10 Legal and Institutional Reform Considerations**

- Enactment of a consolidated Tertiary Education Act
- Establishment of an Independent Regulatory Authority
- Establishment of a National Information Centre on Education in accordance with the UNESCO Global Convention on Recognition of Qualifications and Credentials
- Legal framework for a unified qualification framework
- Legislative support for credit transfer and Recognition of Prior Learning

#### **4.11 Next Steps**

- Consolidation of draft policy chapters
- Fiscal impact analysis
- Legal review
- Public consultation
- Submission of Final National Policy Document

The Committee reiterates its commitment to a transformative, inclusive, democratic, and research-driven tertiary education system aligned with Sri Lanka's long-term national development and social wellbeing.

This Progress Report reflects collective academic, institutional, and stakeholder deliberations and provides the structured foundation for the Final National Higher (Tertiary) Education Policy.

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