



Championing A+ Education

National Educational Policy Framework (NEPF) focus on private investment and partnerships, its effectiveness in addressing existing gaps

The need for stronger regulations and transparency

Uncertainty about the future of free education

The need for holistic reforms encompassing all levels of education, prioritising quality, relevance, and access

The Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy (BALPP) recently hosted its third Policy Dialogue at the BMICH. This student-led event focused on examining the proposed National Educational Policy Framework (NEPF) 2023, specifically exploring its potential impact on different areas such as teaching, learning, governance, investment, and resource allocation.

The Postgraduate Diploma Programme students of BALPP, under the guidance of their course director, Prof. Arjuna Parakrama, facilitated a constructive and critical analysis of the policy framework. Key discussions centred on the need for comprehensive educational reforms encompassing all levels, emphasising enhancing quality and relevance while simultaneously upholding principles of universal access and equal opportunity. The forum attendees reached a consensus that NEPF 2023 serves as a crucial roadmap for guiding future educational reforms in Sri Lanka.

A crucial point brought out by one speaker at the forum was that while far-reaching reforms are needed, any attempts to burden families with additional educational expenses during this period of economic difficulty are doubly unacceptable and unconscionable. A suitable reform package must be accompanied by significantly increased state expenditure on Education at an all-time low of 2.5% of the GDP. It is one of the lowest in the region, and we need to catch up to the developed or developing country model we seek to emulate. She also pointed out that in this situation of inadequate resources, the state's responsibility should be to support state educational institutions, not the private sector.

Inclusivity, transparency, and quality

The governing principle of education is that it should be a fundamental human right for all of us. All stakeholders should participate, including students, parents, teachers, administrators, employers, and citizens. Therefore, there must be accountability and transparency. It must consider all the children in the country, everywhere, remote or in the city, even the differently-abled. She added that producing quality teachers is critical to achieving the goals of NEPF 2023. She also pointed out that educational expenses in 2024 will be higher than in 2023 because of increased taxation. The economic crisis and Covid-19 have had an effect on our school system. 95% of the current fund allocation for the educational sector is to cover operational costs in salaries. We are faced with numerous challenges that we will have to overcome.

"Government regulations to govern private sector education are a prerequisite to the proposals made in the NEPF 2023. These regulations need to cover basic amenities and teaching capacities. As of now, most private schools experience a high turnover of teachers for various reasons. Tuition is thriving exponentially, not just for competitive examinations but for the ordinary as well. Given the size and scale of the current private education sector, school owners will scrutinise any regulation with a heavy possibility of resistance.

Therefore, the question remains: Is it possible to enforce certain far-reaching changes while the proposed Government legislation is still in draft mode? When transforming docile, unskilled employees into effective employees and leaders, higher Education adds value to the country's economy directly and indirectly. System weaknesses and outdated modalities must be identified and addressed. The state universities are experiencing a serious lack of resources, affecting their ability to function, from the brain drain to increased class sizes. There are calls for a strategy to realign existing resources, ensuring that Education is holistic, unlocking a person's potential while producing lifelong learners and good citizens who are thoughtful and conscious of their responsibility to their family, community, and country and can lead responsible and productive lives."

The NEPF was prepared by a Cabinet-Appointed Expert Committee. Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake, who attended the event at the BMICH, is also the Chairman of the Cabinet Committee for preparing the NEPF. Members of the National Education Commission were also at the event at the BMICH. The discussion raised many questions and provided us with much food for thought. The various perspectives shared at the forum were undoubtedly thought-provoking.

At the beginning of the event, it was mentioned that this NEPF is unique and different from the other policy dialogues. It is the first policy dialogue that the students of the Postgraduate Diploma Course on Education Policy and Analysis are leading. There are five postgraduate diploma courses, one in education policy and analysis. It is also significant because it is the first time they have discussed the Government Prepared National Education Policy Framework.

Parliamentary insights and expert guidance

Currently, there is a Parliament Sectoral Oversight Committee on Education. The National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) draft was discussed in the Sectoral Oversight Committee on Education chaired by Member of Parliament Dr V Radhakrishnan. The Committee met on November 23, where the members of parliament



presented several suggestions regarding the draft. Subsequently, the Committee discussed the amendments made based on those proposals. Anura Dissanayake, Chairman of the Cabinet Committee, and Nihal Ranasinghe, Secretary of the Ministry of Education, deliberated on the new amendments submitted to the draft of this policy framework. The Committee Chair mentioned that a programme will be organised to make all members of parliament aware of the said draft in the future.

Secretary to the Prime Minister and Chairman of the Cabinet Committee for preparing the NEPF, Anura Dissanayake, pointed out that this is indeed a timely topic that is being discussed because it has been emphasised repeatedly that education infrastructure plays a vital role in shaping the future of a country. Therefore, the NEPF is essential for shaping the country's future through Education. Various age groups were present at the discussion, and he addressed the youth gathered, emphasising that their input is very valuable.

He clarified that he was not representing himself as the Secretary to the Prime Minister but as the Expert Committee Chair appointed by the Cabinet of Ministers to assist the Cabinet Committee in the operation of the NEPF. The goal is to present it to parliament, share it with stakeholders, and incorporate gradual changes into the education system.

He highlighted that the NEPF document is still in the draft stage and undergoing various discussions. The Cabinet Committee, under the chairmanship of the President, appointed a Cabinet Committee, and simultaneously, an Expert Committee of 25 members was appointed to assist in formulating the draft policy document. These members represent various fields and skill sets, including academia and information technology.

Stakeholder engagements

Dissanayake explained that this systematic arrangement will have a far-reaching effect on Education in Sri Lanka if and when implemented. The draft will address primary, junior secondary, senior secondary, collegiate, and tertiary education in Sri Lanka, considering government changes and developments in the educational field over the years. The IT committee's role is crucial in integrating and ensuring proficiency in Information Technology in the teaching and learning processes.

Dissanayake added that the initial draft of the NEPF was presented to the cabinet for their observations. After receiving observations from the Cabinet of Ministers, it went before the Parliamentary Oversight, comprising members from all parties. Based on their observations, alterations were made to the draft, which will be tabled at the next parliamentary session.

"So, it is still a draft. We are actively engaged in stakeholder consultations, assessing whether this draft aligns with our goals and is compatible and acceptable for shaping the future citizens of Sri Lanka. We have participated in various stakeholder forums, focusing our policy goals on access, quality, and relevance. The paths and opportunities of Education must be accessible to



every youth in Sri Lanka, ensuring both quality and relevance. This draft must be effective and meaningful. We all agree that the forward-moving transformation process must align with UNESCO guidelines."

Dissanayake's comments are indeed relevant when considering the Constitution of UNESCO and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, particularly Article 26, paragraph 2 of the latter, which states: "Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance, and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations to maintain peace."

Several students also spoke at the event. One student added that quality education is not a privilege or luxury but a human right. His speech focused on Education as a right, pointing out that in Sri Lanka, some 80 years ago, in



Anura Dissanayake: Exploring the dynamics and challenges in Sri Lanka's education system.



Professor Arjuna Parakrama

1943, free Education was proposed irrespective of social status. This was five years before the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which only called for Elementary Education to be free. "It was only in 1966 that there was an international call for Secondary and Higher Education to be free. In the 80 years, there has been a focus on global rights discourse because the world is changing, and our expectations from Education are also evolving. Many emerging threats have to be taken into account."

Nexus of state obligations

His next question was: Why is it important to recognise education as a right? Because rights lead to obligations of the state. If a policy recognises a right, it has to declare what the state will do to respect and protect those rights. "If you do not recognise it, the policy lets the state off the hook. For example, let's look at free Education. Again, it depends on who is making the policy. The Ministry of Education and NVC are clearly committed to continuing free Education. Private Education in the NVC policy is only not for profit. The PTF at least acknowledged it. The NEPF doesn't even mention it. Anyone reading this document would not know that this country had almost 80 years of free Education. There is no guarantee that tertiary Education will be free. It is not going to be free by default. Because there is student contribution, and their contribution will be out of pocket unless you can get a government grant. So, if you can't go through the loopholes of qualifying for that, you have to pay on your own. For some people in the country, free Education is their only means for social mobility."

What about the purpose of Education? "Again, it depends on who is writing the policy documents. Is it about creating workers for a workforce? If you look at the aims of Education in the Convention of the Rights of the Child that Sri Lanka ratified in 1991,

they are cultivated. The only purpose of Education is not only gainful work. Paid work is not the only thing that we do in our lives. We care for our body, mind and soul. We have family, friends and neighbours. We enjoy art, work for environmental conservation, and look after our children. We participate in political life, and we volunteer for causes. We are ambassadors to the world of what it means to be Sri Lankan. We enjoy life. Education must help us do all of those things better. We are not just workers," he added.

Another student addressed the role of the private sector and private education, which has been widely discussed in public discourse regarding the education system in Sri Lanka. "To clarify this, we will condense the key recommendations made by the NEPF regarding private Education. An unregulated private education industry has emerged, responding to gaps in education delivery for state students. Throughout the document, it emphasises the deficient private sector investment in Education. So, let us identify a few areas and a few concerns.

Firstly, the NEPF proposals address affirmation gaps through private investment and private-party partnerships. However, the 'how' and 'when' remain unspecified. The NEPF calls for close regulations, quality assurance, and monitoring to ensure the quality of private Education in Sri Lanka, but no further details are provided. There is a lack of information regarding the resources needed for these regulations, quality assurance, and monitoring. The funding for the overall transformation of Education specified in the NEPF is expected to come mainly through the redeployment of existing resources, leveraging additional resources via partnerships with non-state entities, and private contributions. However, no concrete plan or budget for this funding has been discussed. Funding allocations are also supposed to be performance-based and enrolment-based, but there is no implementation roadmap.

Private education's role

She added that there needs to be a definition of what WHO refers to when broadly speaking of private education and the private sector. "Does this refer to all private schools? The numerous tuition centres in the country? Does this refer to unregistered private and international schools referenced in the article's report? Or does this refer to early childhood development centres within the bounds of the private investors mentioned? Does this refer to private companies, partnerships, international corporations, or above? Returning to the opening statement, an unregulated private education industry has emerged, responding to gaps in education delivery in state schools.

The report has not clarified the connection between these gaps and the necessity of private Education. Everyone in the audience knows these gaps entail a lack of teachers, textbooks, geographic factors, teacher remuneration, and overall student access to the education system. What is unclear is how private sector investment will address these gaps. The reason we have gaps in the education system is due to fierce competition in the system. Think about the grade 5 scholarship exam and University entrance. The mushrooming of private education institutes will not address these gaps, which is evident from the fact that students in private and international schools also frequent tuition classes.

Students from the best and most widely acclaimed private and local schools are taught by the same teachers who teach private tuition classes. So, there is more clarity on the connection between how addressing these gaps will be done by increased investment in the private sector. What should be addressed is the level of competition in the education system," she pointed out.

From what has been said so far, many theories have been proposed. Many questions remain. However, we have learned that the students and youth of this country must be involved in decision-making. The NEPF will be vital in creating the next generation of Sri Lankans with knowledge and a passion for their country. This student-led dialogue is only the beginning.

National Education Policy Framework (NEPF) 2023 and Stakeholder Perspectives

1. Event overview:

- The Bandaranaike Academy for Leadership and Public Policy (BALPP) hosted its third Policy Dialogue at the BMICH.

- Student-led discussion focused on the proposed NEPF 2023, exploring impacts on teaching, learning, governance, investment, and resource allocation.

2. Stakeholder perspectives:

- Student-led analysis: Postgraduate Diploma Programme students analysed the NEPF under Prof. Arjuna Parakrama's guidance, emphasising comprehensive educational reforms for quality, relevance, universal access, and equal opportunity.

- Financial concerns: A speaker highlighted the need for reforms without imposing additional educational expenses on families during economic challenges. Emphasised increased state expenditure, currently at 2.5% of GDP, as crucial for effective reforms.

- Private sector regulation: Concerns raised about the unregulated private education industry, emphasising the necessity of government regulations covering basic amenities and teaching capacities. Questions arose on enforcing changes during the draft stage.

3. Government initiatives:

- NEPF development: The NEPF was prepared by a Cabinet-Appointed Expert Committee, with Secretary to the Prime Minister Anura Dissanayake as Chairman of the Cabinet Committee. The draft underwent parliamentary and sectoral oversight, incorporating observations and alterations.

- Stakeholder engagement: Anura Dissanayake emphasised ongoing stakeholder consultations to align the NEPF with goals, emphasising UNESCO guidelines. The systematic approach involves 25 committee members representing various fields.

4. Education as a right and purpose:

- Student perspective: A student stressed education as a human right, questioning the recognition and guarantee of free tertiary education in the NEPF. He highlighted the evolving global rights discourse and the importance of recognising diverse purposes of education beyond workforce preparation.

- Private sector role: Another student addressed the emergence of an unregulated private education industry, pointing out gaps in the NEPF regarding private education regulations, funding details, and the definition of private institutes.

5. Challenges and next steps:

- Financial challenges: Economic crisis and COVID-19 impact highlighted challenges, with 95% of current fund allocation covering operational costs. Calls for a strategy to realign resources for holistic education.

- Student involvement: Despite unanswered questions and theories proposed, the dialogue emphasised the crucial role of students and youth in decision-making. The NEPF is seen as a pivotal tool for shaping the next generation of Sri Lankans.