

Policy Note 9

Ensuring Quality and Equitable Education



Maldives
Partnership
Forum 2019

Investing in a Resilient & Sustainable Maldives

The Maldives achieved Education for All - the MDG target for primary education well ahead of the target dates. Universal primary education was achieved by 2002 with no significant gender disparity. Maldives has also achieved and sustained an adult literacy rate of over 98% since the late 1990s. The Net Enrollment Rate (NER) at primary levels stands at approximately 99.49% for female and 99.51% for male children of ages 6-7, respectively. The transition rate from primary to secondary is near universal, 99% nationwide in 2016. In the 7-year period between 2009 and 2015, the secondary net enrolment has been above 80%. However, despite these positive outcomes, the education sector faces serious challenges.

This brief highlights the challenges faced by the education sector and outlines the policy interventions of the Government to ensure the provision of a quality and equitable education for all.

Issues/Challenges

Lower Levels of Access at the Higher Secondary Level:

Large number of students drop out at later stages of the general education cycle. Although enrolment at the higher secondary level has increased over time, NER is still low, currently standing at 44.5%. Out of the 225 schools in the country, only 38 schools provide higher secondary education; 4 schools in Male' and 34 schools in the atolls. This is contributed by historical government policy which focused on the expansion of primary schools to achieve the targets on universal primary education, without a balanced focus on lower secondary schools to cater for the age group of 13-15 years.

Quality of Education:

The Government introduced a system of National Assessment of Learning Outcomes (NALO) in 2016. These assessments are administered annually to a sample of students from Grade 4 and 7, who are tested on numeracy and literacy in English and Dhivehi. The results of these examinations indicate that the country needs to strengthen its efforts to improve the quality of learning. Despite the innovative teaching and learning practices in the new curriculum, the promotion of memorisation rather than comprehension and higher order cognitive thinking still prevails. Teacher training is still not aligned with the new curriculum, leaving gaps in teacher allocations for different subjects. Further review is also needed to ensure the quality of teachers is standardised across the country and that the functions and practices of quality control bodies are transparent and independently reviewed.

Need for a Holistic National Curriculum:

Although the new curriculum made positive strides towards a holistic education system, there is still much work that needs to be done. The national curriculum should be reflective of the socio-economic context of the Maldives. Anti-bullying, gender equality and democratic values need to be emphasised through the education system. Additionally, strict demarcation of subject areas into 'arts', 'business', and 'science' give way for misconceptions relating to

specific subjects. For example, there is a prevalent perception that 'science stream' subjects are more relevant and suited for brighter students.

Disparities in Performance:

There are clear disparities in performance, along the lines of gender, as well as location. A gender analysis of students from both Grade 4 and 7 in Mathematics, English and Dhivehi language assessments showed that achievement is significantly higher in females, than males. There are also clear geographical disparities with students in the atolls having less access to quality education and less options to choose from, in comparison to students in Male'. For example, cognitive achievement levels in English language skills, at both grade 4 and grade 7 are considerably higher in Male' than elsewhere in the Maldives.

Need for Inclusivity in Education

Traditional curricula and instructional techniques are not always optimal for students with cognitive, emotional, or physical disabilities. To provide equal access to education, general education has been adapted and modified to effectively and efficiently impart education for all students. Though education institutions have become more inclusive spaces under inclusive education policies, there are significant variations across the country. Firstly, the physical infrastructure of most buildings do not have disability access. Secondly, there are no mechanisms established within the education sector to identify or address the needs of students with disabilities early on. Therefore, even if parents do provide evidence of special needs, teachers are often untrained to deal with these needs or provide early intervention within pre-schoolers.

Lack of Labour Market Relevance:

The education system, especially in the secondary and higher secondary levels, lack labour market relevance. This is evidenced by the challenges Maldivian youth face when they enter the labour market. School leavers are often ill prepared to meet the demands of the work environment and lack professional skills. Students seeking higher education in Maldives also face challenges due to the limited options available. Available courses often relate to IT, teaching, nursing, and business. Despite the increase in private education and training providers, there are still limited opportunities for training in non-government funded sectors such as construction.

Lack of Accessibility and Affordability to Attain Higher Education:

Most of the higher education institutions are centered in the capital with a few number of programs available in the outer islands at branches of the Maldives National University and Villa College, a private higher education institution. Students of low-income families usually depend on loan schemes in order to achieve higher education. These loan schemes are highly competitive and limited in availability. Many students also work full-time jobs while simultaneously obtaining higher education. For those working within the atolls, higher education institutes also provide "block mode" courses where they travel to Male' or a nearby campus over weekends. This also adds to

the financial burden due to transportation cost and accommodation along with inability to attend classes during severe weather conditions.

Lack of Academic Research Opportunities:

There are a growing number of researchers, but lack of funding and availability of resources hinder an enabling environment for research. A vibrant research sector conducting studies especially in areas of national interest is critical to enable evidence-based decision making for more efficient and effective utilization of resources.

Policy Initiatives

Ensure Equitable Access and Completion from Kindergarten Through to Grade 12, for all Children, Especially for Children With Special Needs and Children at Risk

As outlined above, though education is free until the first degree, there is lack of access to education, especially higher secondary education in Maldives. Many migrate within the atolls and also to Male' for education. Therefore, it is a key priority of the Government to provide equitable access to education for all children.

Key initiatives under this policy include:

- Integrating the monitoring of children at risk of failing or dropping out, into the Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS) to improve the implementation of policies on children at risk;
- Developing and implementing flexible and additional frameworks for students with special needs, with a particular focus on outer islands;
- Strengthening educational programs for children with special needs through early identification, diagnosis, and targeted interventions;
- Improving the quality of teaching at public schools in the outer islands by hiring quality teachers and providing effective methodologies for learning and teaching.

Modernise and Ensure the Quality of the Education System Through Strengthened Governance and Improved Service Delivery

Key initiatives under this goal include:

- Strengthening the Maldives Education Management Information System (MEMIS), with a focus on sustainability, technicality, decentralisation and stakeholder participation, for effective policy development and implementation;
- Implementing School Improvement Plans (SIP) focused on adequate responses to at-risk students, equitable access, and improve learning outcomes, skills/soft skills, and wellbeing;
- Ensure effective use of technology in the education system for improved service delivery;
- Take measures to address bullying and instil gender equality, ensuring psychological support to students, and instil democratic values and good governance within students;
- Decentralise education management to enhance efficiency and quality of education.

Enhance the Learning Environment to Ensure Provision of a Holistic Education System

A departure from previous systems, integrating a holistic education system in schools is a priority for the Government in order to ensure inclusive and equitable access to education.

Key initiatives under this goal include:

- Transforming all schools to single session schools
- Improving physical accessibility, as well as health and safety conditions of all schools
- Developing essential infrastructure required to enhance the learning environment in schools.

Integrate Pre-Vocational and Life Skills Development in School Systems

Key initiatives under this goal include:

- Introduce vocational training to the school system by ensuring equity, quality, gender, geographic equality, and pathways between streams.
- Familiarising younger students to vocational education.
- Increasing opportunities for higher education by supporting learning pathways between different streams and expansion of vocational education.

Enhance Teaching and Leadership Qualities and Strengthen the Administration of the Education System

In order to ensure quality of education, the standard of teachers and their preparedness in teaching the curriculum needs to be addressed. Therefore, initiatives under this goal include;

- Improving the benchmarks for teacher quality in Teacher Professional Standards;
- Supporting schools in subject based in-service training and participation in the school-based professional development;
- Developing the technical capacity of school managements and relevant institutions to promote holistic education and to improve teaching and learning.

Strengthen Higher Education Financing Mechanisms to Ensure Greater Accessibility to Quality Higher Education for All:

The current administration has launched a free education scheme for students pursuing their first degree in the Maldives. This scheme covers complete course fees for students at the Maldives National University and Islamic University of Maldives, and a very high percentage of course fees at private colleges.

Additionally, the Government aims to:

- Develop and maintain a sustainable financing and investment model for higher education and training;
- Expand Government funded scholarship schemes with a particular focus on increasing opportunities in areas with skill shortages;
- Expand and revise the student loan scheme to ensure greater accessibility, while reducing the burden for students in the repayment of loans.

Quality Assurance of Higher Education:

Key initiatives to ensure higher education institutes provide quality education include:

- Providing quality library services for university students; establishment of a national research institute enrich academia;
- Strengthening the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) with the enactment of the Maldives Qualification Authority Law;
- Helping students fulfil their potential by ensuring high-achiever's scholarship schemes grants access to world-renowned universities.

Foster the Culture of Academic Research and Facilitate Evidence-based Policymaking:

Key initiatives under this goal include:

- Establishing a National Research Institute to foster and facilitate research in strategic areas;
- Facilitating establishment and operation of research centers in academic institutions;
- Establishing a National Research Council and introduce a national research scheme funding scheme for universities.