



Why Vocational Counseling should be Provided through the Educational System

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Only 1.8% of the students who appear for the GCE Advanced Level Examination are admitted to the universities. The balance 98.2% of the students cannot gain entry to the universities. It is apparent however, that neither those in the educational sector nor in the media focus attention on this serious problem confronting the vast majority of students who are left out of the university system. The print and electronic media highlight only the number of A grades that those who are eligible to enter the university obtain and the schools that had been successful in producing the highest number of university entrants.

What happens to the large number of students who do not enter the university? Since these students are scattered throughout the country it is a difficult task to ascertain their fate.

Vocational counseling, in simple terms is the guidance provided to obtain training in a particular vocation. The task of vocational counseling should be the responsibility of the vocational training schools. Although some argue that the responsibility for this task should be that of the Ministry of Education, others contend that the vocational training institutes should undertake it. The common understanding is that all these institutions should have a joint responsibility. There are 11,000 schools in Sri Lanka. The number of pupils attending schools is ap-

proximately 4 million. Vocational guidance and counseling should be provided to students in Grades 8,9 and above.

The 12 technical and vocational training institutes, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education organised a vocational counseling week from 13-19 September 1999 in 400 centres throughout the country. This project was targeted at those school pupils who presented themselves for then AL examination.

The project titled 'From School to the World of Work' aims at targeting approximately 110,000 students. If students who are successful at the AL examination cannot gain entry to the university, it is necessary that they are provided alternative career paths. However, the perception of the majority of students is that if they are unable to follow a course of studies at the university, they have no other alternatives. Therefore, the students should be made aware of alternative choices available to them by providing information on training courses, the names of the institution conducting such courses, the location etc. Dissemination of this type of information is essential for awareness raising among students.

Vocational counseling cannot achieve much success by raising the awareness of only the students. It is imperative that two other groups of persons who exert an influence on the student's thinking and their decision making process, namely parents and teachers are also brought within the ambit of such awareness raising programmes.

Today many parents aspire for their children either a clerical position or a teaching assignment in the public sector. However, it is not possible for the government to provide teaching or clerical jobs to all those who apply for such posts. The parents have to be made aware of this position. Even if the students realise the current reality, the parents may attempt to change the decisions of the children. Therefore, an attempt has to be made to bring about an attitudinal change among the parents.

A similar exercise is required to raise awareness among the teachers as well. It is possible for teachers to direct the students through vocational guidance to alternative areas of study and not insist on a university education.

Table 1

Unemployment

Year	Number Unemployed	Unemployed Ratio (as a % of the total Labour Force)
1990	953794	15.9
1991	861860	14.7
1992	845957	14.6
1993	830910	13.8
1994	797591	13.1
1995	739341	12.3
1996	705156	11.3
1997	649000	10.4
1998 ^{1st} qr	701067	10.6
2 nd qr	623197	0.5
3 rd qr	607403	0.1

Source : Labour Market Information Vol. 1/99
qr - quarter





Table 1 below shows the extent of the problem of unemployment in Sri Lanka. Unemployment stood at 607,403 or 9.2% of the labour force during the second quarter of 1998. When compared with the previous year, this figure represents a reduction in the number unemployed, which is a positive trend.

It can be seen from table 2 below that 51% of the unemployed have not passed the GCE OL Examination, while 28.3% have been successful at the GCE OL and 18.5% have passed the GCE AL examination.

If vocational guidance had been provided to the students while they were studying in the GCE O Level and A Level classes, there may have been the possibility of directing the students to others career paths. According to the statistics in Table 3, of the unemployed only 25% of those who had received vocational training were without employment in 1997/98. Thus 75% of those who have had vocational training were employed.

In directing students to a particular vocation, it becomes important to select a trade for which there is a market demand. Table 4 shows that the employment potential of those with specific skills varies from trade to trade. This table which provides information on 19 vocational and technical trades shows those that have a high and low demand.

When a trade with a high demand is selected the possibility of obtaining employment is high. Carpentry and woodwork technical courses, which

many are reluctant to follow, are two sectors, which have a high demand. For example, in 1997/98 only 2.7% of those who followed wood working courses remained unemployed. Of those who followed the masonry course only 5.8% are unemployed. However, 51.6% of those who enter the most popular course of study, namely computer studies, were unemployed. This shows that the computer studies courses are not structured to meet current market requirements. Both parents and students are of the view that it would be possible to find employment, if any computer course is followed. However, statistics reveal that this view is erroneous. It does not mean however that all the computer course are unsuitable. Yet most courses that are offered today fall into the unsuitable category. What is important to realise is that in selecting a course of study, due consideration should be paid to the suitability of that course to meet the existing demands of the market.

The Tertiary and Vocational Training Commission has made an attempt to identify those sectors for which there is a demand. It has identified five sectors and released five reports containing information on job opportunities and vacancies that could arise within the next three years. The sectors

identified by the Commission are Gems and Jewellery, Construction, Printing, Hotel and Tourist Trade and Textiles and Garments. Among these sectors, the highest number of vacancies that exist at present are in the textile and garment industries. According to the reports, it is anticipated that there would be 83560 positions in 1999, 83560 in 2000 and 84448 in all these sectors.

Table 5 reveals that the highest number of job opportunities is available for sewing machine operators. However, although there is a demand for this category of workers, it has been difficult to attract women into these jobs. The attitudes prevalent among the public relating to workers employed in these industries and the unnecessary publicity given by the media are attributed to the scarcity of applicants for these vacancies. Although the VTA had attempted to train 10000 workers, it has been my personal experience that the VTA has had to exert a considerable amount of effort to achieve its training target. The VTA has organised training courses taking into account the requirements of the private sector manufacturing industries. It is reported that the response to this effort is positive.

It becomes evident that training courses should be oriented towards job opportunities and to meet the demand of the various sectors of the economy. In 1999, the Technical and Vocational Training Commission initiated training courses to meet the requirements of the other sectors as well. It is therefore imperative to identify the sectors that generate a demand for labour and to orient the training courses to suit such demand. Many students believe that success at the GCE O Level and A Level examinations would be sufficient for them to obtain employment. However, it is debatable as to how many of those who have been successful at these two examinations are employed by private sector organisations.

Table 3
Vocational Training and Unemployment 1997/98

Total unemployment	65466
No. with V.T.	16429
No. without V.T.	49037



Unemployed Population

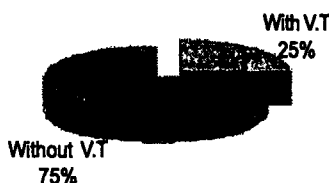


Table 2

Educational Level	Total	Age Groups			
		15-29	30-44	over 45	All age groups %
No schooling	100	87.7	12.3	0.0	0.4
1-10	100	81.4	15.0	3.6	51.0
GCE (OL)	100	80.8	16.5	2.7	28.3
GCE (AL)	100	82.1	16.7	0.7	18.5
Degree	100	88.4	10.8	0.8	1.8
All levels	100	81.6	15.6	2.8	100.0

Source: Labour Market Information Bulletin

