



COMPETITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: IS LIMITED PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS AFFECTING QUALITY?

Fazeel Najeeb

In the Strategic Action Plan (SAP) 2019-2023, the government recognises that increasing and developing “human capital is vital” to attaining two objectives: sustaining growth and improving youth employability. If “growth” here refers to that of the economy, it is reasonable to assume that as growth

“ SAP also sees the “lack of quality higher education” as the biggest challenge ”

is sustained, jobs are likely to be created and will need to be filled. The cohort that the SAP aims to target to increase and develop human capital is youth, so that

success in doing so would increase their chances of being employed in these jobs.

To get there, the government sees developing tertiary education, including technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and higher education avenues as a priority. But SAP also sees the “lack of quality higher education” as the biggest challenge that the sector [higher education] faces, and cites “lack of infrastructure, budgetary constraints, and a lack of skilled professionals to develop the higher education sector as some of the challenges in

delivering quality higher education”.

Within the above context, SAP lists the following as “some of the policy priorities of the subsector” (i.e. higher education): expanding higher education opportunities, increasing access to student finance, fostering a culture of academic research, facilitating evidence-based policymaking, delivering quality vocational education and aligning such opportunities to the economic sector and industry needs.

Higher education is presented as the second of five

“subsectors” [sub-themes] under the second of the main five sectors [themes], “Caring State”. The SAP is structured in a way that an issue identified as such in a sector/subsector is addressed under a policy, each policy has a number of targets and strategies, and each strategy has a number of actions. The higher education subsector has the following seven policies and their respective targets that, we must assume, seek to address the issue of lack of quality higher education:

Higher Education Policies and Targets in the Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023
<p>Policy 1: Expand and strengthen the Higher Education sector to ensure equitable Higher Education opportunities nationwide.</p> <p><u>Policy 1 targets:</u> Target 1.1: By 2023, 60% Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) in Higher Education Target 1.2: By 2023, 200 scholarship opportunities provided across Maldives, under a public-private partnership arrangement Target 1.3: By 2023, 5 junior colleges in 5 identified regions established and operational Target 1.4: By 2023, 5 Higher Education and Training facilities in 5 different regions established and operational Target 1.5: By 2023, e-learning services are made accessible in all islands</p>
<p>Policy 2: Strengthen Higher Education financing mechanisms to ensure greater accessibility to quality Higher Education for all.</p> <p><u>Policy 2 Targets:</u> Target 2.1: By 2023, at least 25,000 students given opportunity to study under the free first-degree scheme Target 2.2: By 2023, at least 1000 students awarded HE scholarships Target 2.3: By 2023, at least 2500 students receive loan to pursue HE abroad and in Maldives Target 2.4: By 2021, loan administration fee reduced to 1%</p>
<p>Policy 3: Strengthen the governance of Higher Education sector to bring in efficiency and ensure quality of higher education and enhance the international standing of the Maldivian higher education system.</p> <p><u>Policy 3 Targets:</u> Target 3.1: By 2020, Higher Education Act enacted Target 3.2: By 2023, MQA governance structure fully implemented as per the Higher Education Act Target 3.3: By 2023, a revised institutional structure with clear roles and mandates of HEIs operationalized Target 3.4: By 2021, all HE data collected, managed and compiled via a Higher Education Management Information System (HEMIS)</p>
<p>Policy 4: Foster a culture of academic research and facilitate evidence-based policymaking.</p> <p><u>Policy 4 Targets:</u> Target 4.1: By 2020, National Research Council and research fund established Target 4.2: By 2023, up to 30 research projects for national development depending on relevancy and demand, supported by the national research council</p>
<p>Policy 5: Ensure high quality of TVET programmes and curricula focusing on both work-related skills and soft skills through research and innovation.</p> <p><u>Policy 5 Targets:</u> Target 5.1: By 2022, TVET curriculum revised in line with international industry benchmarks Target 5.2: By 2021, e-platform is functional and up to date with student data Target 5.3: By 2023, 5 state-of-the-art TVET training institutions established in 5 Regional Urban Centres (RUCs)</p>

Policy 6: Ensure employability, retention, and relevance of TVET programmes for the economic and labour sectors.

Policy 6 Targets:

Target 6.1: By 2023, 6 co-working spaces created and, incubation centres established in Malé and 5 Regional Urban Centres

Target 6.2: By 2020, RPL policy developed and implemented

Target 6.3: By 2023, career portal is available for anyone looking for training or a job

Policy 7: Strengthen the capacity of the TVET system

Policy 7 Targets:

Target 7.1: By 2023, 5 partnership agreements signed with international organizations to integrate innovation in TVET provision

Target 7.2: By 2021, an ICT management platform established to strengthen and support all RTOs

Source: Strategic Action Plan 2019-2023, The President's Office

Out of these which policies address what SAP describes as the biggest challenge – lack of quality education? Policies 1 and 2 are on equity and funding/financing respectively. Policy 3 speaks expressly of higher education quality, while policy 4 might also be said to contribute to raising quality in some way. Policies 5, 6 and 7 appear focused on TVET. Do the policies also address the other challenges that SAP identifies – lack of infrastructure, budgetary constraints, and a lack of skilled professionals?

“ A basic question that arises when discussing higher education quality is about our understanding of a or the definition of quality ”

It could be argued that all these policies indirectly contribute to raising quality in some way as also could be argued that they do not.

But what is quality in the context of higher education? A basic question that arises when discussing higher education quality is about our understanding of a

or the definition of quality. While SAP may not be the place for such a definition, work on a declared objective of raising the quality of higher education must start from a position that sector participants recognise, both private and public higher education institutions (HEIs). Whether we are to understand that a definition has to be worked out domestically or to adapt a foreign definition to domestic context is left ambiguous in SAP.

Nonetheless, we may note that in policy 3, SAP speaks to “enhance the international standing of the Maldivian higher education system.” Here, it could be argued that SAP recognises the need for understanding “quality” in the context of higher education in a way that enables our higher education system can be compared with international counterparts. The definition, therefore, ought to embody aspects of quality that are widely recognised internationally since otherwise a comparison to determine the “international standing” is less likely to be possible. Policy 3 thus points to the necessity of

maintenance of a credible quality assurance system that is adhered to by all domestic HEIs, private and public alike without exception.

“ ... the proliferation of HEIs earlier has also led to a situation where supply appears to have exceeded demand ... ”

While HEIs should collectively contribute to raising quality, an individual HEI must first be able to fund itself or be funded. For public HEIs, their budgets are funded entirely or largely by the government. The same is not true in the case of private HEIs that entirely or largely depend on student fees either paid by students themselves, corporate or private sponsorships or covered by a government scheme that came into effect recently.

But the proliferation of HEIs earlier has also led to a situation where supply appears to have exceeded demand and the consequent competition for students is having an adverse impact on conventional practices of enrollment. This is said to exist most prevalently in private HEIs where compliance on entry criteria is being circumvented or given a blind eye. The consequence, it is believed, is a decline in quality, described as a situation where intake of weak students is leading to a weakening of standards as graduate output is ostensibly maintained.

Another consequence of the demand-supply

mismatch is the introduction of the so-called blended (sometimes also referred to by some people as block) mode of instruction. Fulltime employees are allowed to enroll as fulltime students who and lecturers are subjected to long hours of contact on a few number of days each month of the semester. Anecdotes suggest that while the introduction of this mode helps maintain student enrollment, its effect on maintaining quality is not encouraging.

The root of the problem appears to be – or related to – the demand-supply mismatch. In a market-oriented economy it may not be possible to prohibit new entrants (HEIs) to set up shop. The early days of tertiary level education in the country proved so lucrative given the high demand and the lax (or lack of) standards led to a proliferation of HEIs over many years.

Fulltime students on the basis of conventional wisdom that their studies is their fulltime work are now in short supply in the country. Domestic demand for higher education appears saturated. It appears that it is time to look beyond our shores for students.

In my mind I see more students than our capacity coming to Maldives to study – and thereafter, to work – and I see standards of both students and

“ The root of the problem appears to be – or related to – the demand-supply mismatch ”

HEIs – the quality of our higher education system – beginning to rise. In my mind I also see, therefore, the higher education sector as a potentially influential, lucrative one – one that would earn foreign currency and could contribute to relieving our over-reliance on tourism. But I do not see this happening automatically.

