

The Role of Sri Lankan University Education in Achieving Social Mobility: Life Histories of Graduates from 1954-2010

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Sri Lanka is an exception among most developing countries in that access to state subsidized free education has been offered in the country for almost 70 years. However, since the 1970s, Sri Lanka's university education system has faced a barrage of criticism over inadequate resource allocation and the quality of university education provided. Focusing on narrow economic aspects, the current debate has largely neglected the wider social objectives of university education including its facilitating role in social mobility.

Furthermore, there is a dearth of empirical evidence on how a university degree confers social mobility in Sri Lanka. Most studies have concentrated on economic returns to the graduate and been limited to graduates from a specific year/discipline. Hence, this study explores the impact of university education through a much wider scope and time.

The specific objectives of this qualitative study were to: understand how graduates from different decades may have used university education to change their life circumstances (in both economic and social dimensions); identify key policy changes regarding university education which influenced access to and impacts of university education.

The study captures intergeneration changes through multiple dimensions: economic class, individual earnings, household income and assets, and occupational status. It also analyses individual and household mobility in terms of human and social capital: communication skills, self-confidence, occupational mobility, health and wellbeing, networks, social cohesion, etc.

Data was gathered from 26 graduates via interviews using the life history method. Graduates were chosen according to criteria, such as year of graduation, gender, degree programme, university and their socio-economic background. Nvivo software was used to analyze qualitative narratives with a basic analytical framework allowing room to generate findings through a grounded theory approach.

The nature of social mobility created through the university system is evidenced in the change of student attendance overtime, mainly from elitist to working class (rural) family backgrounds. The data suggests that access to free university education has had a direct impact on intergenerational and intra-generational social mobility among graduates. Compared to their parents, graduates show a movement from blue collar to white collar employment, higher and more stable pay and greater employment options. Moreover, graduates also noted that the degree contributed to higher social recognition/status in their communities. This study also provided evidence on how female graduates made their choices between family relationships and occupation.

This study shows that free university education had a profound effect on several generations of Sri Lankans, creating greater social mobility. This paper provides new evidence to identify the impact of free university education both in social and economic terms.

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