

Evolution of Career-Oriented Education and the Implementation Status of the 13-Year Guaranteed Education Programme (13YGEP): A Critical Review

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Abstract

In Sri Lanka, a considerable proportion of students do not meet the academic requirements necessary for further education following the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination, resulting in early school dropouts. To address this issue, the Ministry of Education introduced Circular No. 37/2017, establishing the Thirteen-Year Guaranteed Education Programme (13YGEP). This initiative aims to retain students who are unable to transition to senior secondary education by providing an additional two years of schooling focused on skill development and career readiness. The programme seeks to enhance students' employability and access to diverse professional opportunities both locally and internationally. Implemented in 2017, the vocational stream within the 13YGEP represents a significant expansion of the national curriculum. This study conducts a review of literature on the 13YGEP implementation in Sri Lankan government schools. The objectives include examining the historical evolution of career oriented over past curriculum reforms, synthesizing prior research, analyzing key findings, and identifying knowledge gaps requiring further exploration. A narrative literature review methodology is employed, drawing upon academic sources related to vocational education. A qualitative approach, incorporating thematic analysis, is utilized to examine these studies. The findings highlight the importance of integrating vocational education into school curricula and offer insights into its practical implementation. Additionally, the review underscores the need for further research into expert and stakeholder perspectives and the expansion of vocational subject streams. Identifying effective implementation strategies remains essential for bridging the gap between current research and future educational research.

Keywords: Vocational education, curriculum reforms, Thirteen-Year Guaranteed Education Programme

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Introduction

The predominance of academically oriented education in Sri Lanka has resulted in students entering society with limited skills and unclear future aspirations, contributing to numerous socio-economic challenges. In the context of a rapidly advancing technological and scientific world, the demand for highly skilled workers in emerging fields has increased significantly. However, Sri Lanka faces a critical shortage of skilled personnel to meet these demands, exacerbating the country's economic issues.

Vocational education, delivered through secondary school systems, is widely recognized as a cornerstone for economic development. One significant shortcoming of Sri Lanka's education system is the insufficient integration of vocational education into the school curriculum. To address this issue, the Ministry of Education introduced the Thirteen-Year Guaranteed Education Programme (13YGEP) under Circular No. 37/2017. The initiative aims to provide opportunities for students who are unable to enter senior secondary education due to failure in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. The programme retains these students in the education system for an additional two years, enabling them to develop their skills and talents while preparing for diverse career opportunities, locally and globally.

With a view to critically examine the implementation of the 13YGEP in Sri Lankan government schools within the broader context of the historical evolution of career oriented over the past curriculum reforms in Sri Lanka, a narrative review of literature was conducted.

Objectives

The objectives of this review are to:

1. identify how major curriculum reforms in Sri Lanka were focused on career-based education
2. identify the current state of 13YGEP
3. study the support provided by major education reforms for the current implementation of 13YGEP

Methodology

This study adopted a narrative review of literature as the primary methodological approach to examine the evolution of career-oriented education in Sri Lanka and the implementation status of 13YGEP. A narrative review of literature provides an overview of previous research by describing, comparing, and interpreting studies in a logical and readable manner (Ferrari, 2015). A narrative review was selected because it allows for an interpretive and contextual synthesis of diverse sources, including historical texts, education policy documents, curriculum reform reports, and empirical studies, which is essential for understanding long-term educational developments.

The review is based on secondary data collected from peer-reviewed journal articles, books, government circulars, school census reports, policy papers, and unpublished postgraduate theses. Literature was sourced through academic databases such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed, as well as official publications from the Ministry of Education, the National Institute of

Education, and the Central Bank of Sri Lanka. Although priority was given to studies published between 2018 and 2024, earlier foundational works were included to provide historical and policy context.

A structured but flexible literature selection strategy was employed, focusing on sources related to vocational education, curriculum reforms, secondary education policy, and 13YGEP. The selected literature was analyzed using a thematic narrative approach, whereby key ideas, policy intentions, reform trajectories, implementation challenges, and outcomes were identified through close reading and comparative analysis. Themes were developed inductively and organized chronologically to construct a coherent narrative linking historical reforms with contemporary implementation issues.

To enhance rigour, findings were triangulated across multiple sources, and contrasting perspectives were incorporated. As a narrative review, the study does not claim exhaustiveness; instead, it aims to provide a critical and contextual understanding of vocational education reforms in Sri Lanka between 2018 and 2024.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using a qualitative narrative synthesis approach. The selected literature was analyzed through close, iterative reading to identify key patterns, arguments, and interpretations related to the evolution of career-oriented education and the implementation of 13YGEP in Sri Lanka. Rather than statistical aggregation, emphasis was placed

on understanding meanings, policy intentions, and contextual influences reflected across different sources.

The analysis followed a thematic organization, whereby recurring concepts and issues were identified inductively from the literature. These included historical approaches to vocational education, curriculum reform initiatives, policy objectives, enrollment trends, implementation challenges, and reported outcomes of vocational education programmes. The identified themes were then organised chronologically to construct a coherent narrative linking past education reforms with the current structure and performance of 13YGEP.

Comparative analysis was employed to examine consistencies and divergences across policy documents, empirical studies, and census data. Official statistics and policy reports were used to contextualise qualitative findings and to illustrate trends related to student participation and institutional coverage. Contrasting viewpoints and findings were intentionally included to provide a balanced interpretation and avoid selective reporting.

Through this narrative synthesis, the study integrates historical, policy, and empirical evidence to critically assess the extent to which vocational education has been embedded within Sri Lanka's general education system and to identify gaps requiring further research and policy attention.

Current Situation Analysis

A persistent concern among stakeholders in Sri Lanka's education sector is the adequacy of student enrollment in the vocational stream compared to the significant number of students failing the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination in government schools. A notable issue is that not all students who fail this examination are directed toward vocational education, leading to inefficiencies in addressing their educational and career development needs. Table 1 highlights the annual statistics of students who have not been qualified to advance to the (G.C.E) Advanced Level examination, underscoring the scale of this challenge.

Table 1

Number of students who did not qualify for the Advanced Level (2015 – 2023)

Year	Number of G.C.E. (O/L) failed students	Percentage
2015	96,000	30.06%
2016	86,000	26.95%
2017	85,571	20.91%
2018	77,904	24.91%
2019	82,426	26.16%
2020	84,537	25.49%
2021	79,339	25.49%
2022	81,616	25.69%
2023	80,234	24.97%

(Source: Annual School Census Reports 2015 – 2023, Ministry of Education)

According to the Annual School Census Report (2023), Sri Lanka has a total of 10,096 government schools, of which 525 schools (18%) are implementing this educational stream (Annual School Census Report (2023)). To achieve the anticipated outcomes, the students reflected in the aforementioned figures for these schools must be incorporated into 13YGEP. For instance, in 2023, 80,234 students did not qualify for the G.C.E Advanced Level examination. However, only 10,163 students have been enrolled in 13YGEP (Table 2; Figure 1). Since 2017, the Ministry of Education has introduced the Vocational Stream for Grades 12 and 13 as part of 13YGEP, aiming to reduce school dropouts among students who fail the Ordinary Level examination (Circular 37/2017). Students enrolled in the vocational stream are awarded the Advanced Certificate of Vocational Education (ACVE) upon qualification and are guided toward obtaining NVQ Level 4 certification based on their vocational skills. However, a key challenge in achieving this objective is the limited inclusion of all students who fail the Ordinary Level in the vocational stream.

Table 2

Number of students enrolled in schools in Sri Lanka for 13YGEP (2017 – 2023)

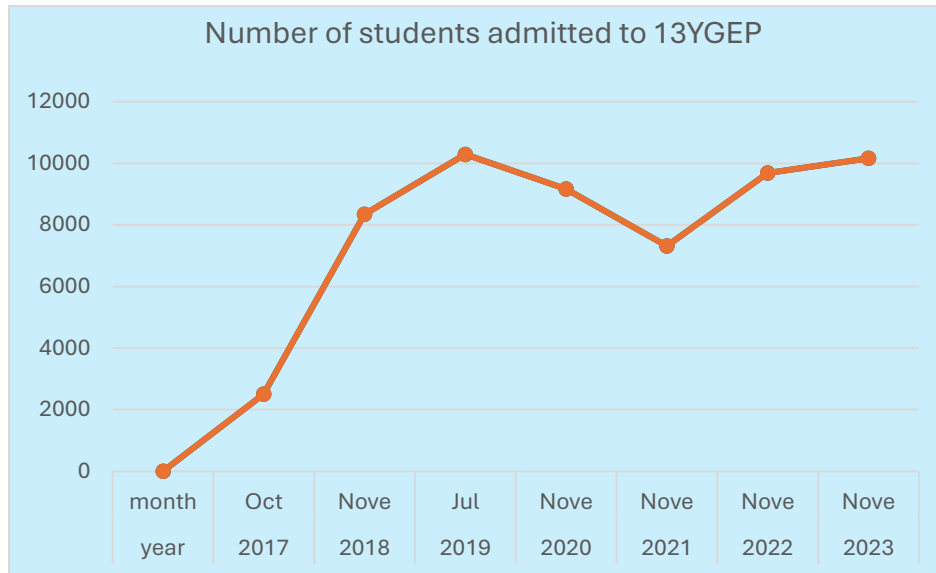
Year	Number of students admitted to 13YGEP	As a percentage of students who failed the O/L
2017	2507	3%
2018	8344	10.7%
2019	10,291	12.5%
2020	9165	10.8%
2021	7317	9.2%
2022	9681	11.9%
2023	10,163	12.7%

Source: Annual School Census Report (2023), Ministry of Education

Figure 01

Number of students admitted to 13YGEP

Source: Annual School Census Report (2023), Ministry of Education



As illustrated in Table 2 and Figure 01, only a small proportion of students who failed the G.C.E Ordinary Level examination have been admitted to schools offering the vocational stream. A significant issue with 13YGEP is the insufficient enrollment of students, which hinders the achievement of the programme's intended objectives. To address this, it is essential to analyze the underlying reasons for low enrollment and develop strategic plans to encourage greater student participation in the vocational stream.

The Evolution of the Vocational Approach in General Education in Sri Lanka

The integration of vocational approaches in Sri Lankan general education began with the introduction of the Life Skills subject in 1983. Initially implemented in a selected group of schools, this initiative was later expanded to Grades 6, 7, and 8 nationwide, supported by the World Bank

and United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF). Subsequent attention to vocational education was evident during the 1998 New Education Reforms and the 2007 Curriculum Reform.

However, the introduction of 13YGEP in 2017 marked a significant milestone, emphasizing vocational orientation for students pursuing the G.C.E. Advanced Level examination. As this research focuses on the current implementation of 13YGEP, the article delves into the evolution of vocational education within the broader structure of school education in Sri Lanka.

Buddhist Education System

Prof. Paranavithana has highlighted evidence from inscriptions dating back to the 1st century AD, which provide details about various artisans. These inscriptions serve as historical records, shedding light on the advanced skills and expertise cultivated during that era (Sumathipala,1993). Some notable examples of these artisans and their contributions are documented in these inscriptions.

- | | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| 1.Lapana (writer or painter) | 8. Tabakara (coppersmith) |
| 2. Chitkara (painter) | 9. Thuladara (goldsmith) |
| 3. Vadaka (architect) | 10. Dathika (ivory carver) |
| 4. Nata or Nada (actor) | 11. Manikara (jeweler) |
| 5. Anikata (military officer) | 12. Kabara (blacksmith) |
| 6. Danukaya (bow maker) | 13. Pehekara (cloth weaver) |

Education in Crafts and Professions

As noted by Wijesekera (1970), it is evident that groups of craftsmen operated under the guidance of specific teachers, forming distinct art sects. These groups, though small in number, developed crafts that maintained interrelated characteristics while retaining unique, identifiable features.

Craft and professional education during this period were primarily practical and likely delivered through craft institutions. Theoretical knowledge, if included, was acquired indirectly through hands-on experience rather than through formal instruction. Vocational education was integrated into the work environment, where skilled craftsmen directly trained their apprentices. This method involved experienced individuals transferring knowledge and expertise to learners, often in a familial context, with fathers teaching their sons or craftsmen mentoring their apprentices.

This approach proved to be highly effective, as students received immediate feedback from their instructors, allowing them to recognize and address their strengths and weaknesses. The curriculum for crafts was predominantly taught through practical activities, emphasizing real-world application. The tradition of passing skills from one generation to the next, whether from father to son or master to apprentice, ensured the continuity and refinement of these crafts over time.

British Education System

A key characteristic of the education systems introduced by the Portuguese, Dutch, and British in Sri Lanka was their focus on using education as a tool for religious propagation, with little emphasis on vocational education.

In the early 19th century, parish school academies and government orphanages were incorporated into the state school system. A significant shift in educational policy began with the publication of the Colebrooke Report in 1832, which marked the start of formal government intervention in education. Colebrooke and the evangelicals advocated education as a legitimate government responsibility. At that time, education served three primary objectives: religious, humane, and practical (National Institute of Education, 2009).

However, by 1991, the education system had become predominantly textbook-based, with little to no emphasis on practical work. This shift resulted in an education system disconnected from the country's economic needs. The education system of the late 19th century produced a generation of young men whose English education left them ill-equipped for professions that aligned with the country's requirements. Instead, they sought minor clerical positions that offered a salary and social prestige (National Institute of Education, 2009).

C.W.W. Kannangara's Rural Education System

Dr. C.W.W. Kannangara's contributions to vocational education were significant, as he worked to develop a system tailored to Sri Lanka's rural context. Efforts were made to integrate schooling with livelihood, aiming to establish a strong connection between education and practical life. A system introduced in 1930, nearly 94 years ago, emphasized two key concepts for teachers:

1. Scope – Limited amount of knowledge appropriate for a specific grade or class
2. Application – Practical use of this knowledge both within and beyond school life

Rubeiru (1964) emphasized that the curriculum should focus on knowledge applicable to real-life situations. This perspective aligned with Kannangara's belief in the importance of practical education, exemplified by his "Village Method" programme.

The rural education system introduced during the Kannangara era placed particular emphasis on agriculture and learning through hands-on activities. Reports from R. Patrick and Lionel Heath, who were regional education inspectors at the time, played a role in shaping this approach. The government aimed to advance Sri Lanka's cottage industries and other productive sectors by incorporating practical training into education (Alawattegama, 2020).

Under this system, the curriculum was divided to allow practical education for half a school day, and the following subjects were introduced:

1. Health
2. Regional and Environmental Education
3. Life Skills
4. Literature, Art, and Music

This experimental approach sought to diversify the school curriculum and integrate productive work with intellectual training. More than half a day was dedicated to practical, outdoor activities. Education through a profession was considered innovative, and the core feature of the rural system was its combination of intellectual and productive work.

The curriculum centred on farming, with some focus on animal husbandry and local crafts. Scientific agricultural principles were taught by specially trained teachers, blending theoretical and practical knowledge. Students gained experience in work similar to that of their parents and neighbours but approached it in a more scientific and methodical manner.

Sumathipala (1993) noted that this system encouraged children to adapt to social reform and bring newfound knowledge back to their communities. Vocational courses under this system were established in areas that directly contributed to the development of rural livelihoods, promoting initiative, creativity, and self-sufficiency (National Institute of Education, 2009).

1. Lacquer Industry - Leli Ambe and Idamegama
2. Pottery Factory - Waragoda
3. Weaving School - Enma
4. Iron Work School - Nawathgama and Palapotha
5. Cane Work School - Batuwandara
6. Flax Carving and Net Making - Kurana, Katunayake
7. Carpentry School - Bentota
8. Coir Work - Hiramadagama
9. Silk Carving and Weaving – Hiramadagama

Expansion of Technical and Vocational Education under C.W.W. Kannangara

On February 1, 1941, most of the thriving industrial schools in Sri Lanka were handed over to the Department of Commerce and Industries, while the remaining institutions were converted into

workshops within middle schools and rural schools. Recognizing the importance of vocational education for addressing the country's economic challenges, C.W.W. Kannangara took decisive steps to establish technical schools (Gunasekera, 2013).

By the end of 1947, the Technical College began offering a wide range of courses covering various engineering fields and vocational skills. These included:

- Engineering Disciplines: Surveying and leveling, building construction, material science, building quantity estimation, city planning, mechanical science, and valuation.
- Vocational and Creative Arts: Chemistry, carpentry drawing, geometric drawing, planning, drawing and painting, weaving, pottery, lacquer work, woodwork, coir work, iron work, brass work, copper work, and cane work.

This comprehensive curriculum was designed to produce skilled, trained individuals who could effectively contribute to society. The policy emphasized that vocational training should begin at school level, equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to meet the demands of society and the economy (Gunasekera, 2013).

By the close of 1947, the Technical College had expanded its offerings to include a wide array of engineering courses. These courses spanned multiple branches of engineering, including surveying, leveling, building construction, material science, quantity estimation, urban planning, mechanical science, valuation, chemistry, carpentry drawing, geometric drawing, and various forms of craftsmanship such as weaving, pottery, lacquer work, woodwork, coir work, ironwork,

brass work, copper work, and cane work (Gunasekera, 2013). The overarching aim of this educational policy was to equip students, upon leaving school, with the necessary skills to effectively engage with society. It underscored the notion that education should primarily serve as a training ground for future societal participation (National Institute of Education, 2009).

A significant reform introduced during this period was the inclusion of a new subject, "Work Orientation," in the primary school curriculum. This initiative marked a further step toward embedding vocational principles within the educational framework (Rubeiru, 1964). However, despite these efforts, the current school system continues to fall short of meeting the economic requirements of the country. There is a consistent demand for a diverse workforce, encompassing unskilled, semi-skilled, skilled workers, as well as professionals suited for clerical, executive, administrative, and industrial roles. Yet, in many countries, the most capable students continue to ascend through the educational hierarchy, often leaving the system ill-prepared to address the broader economic needs.

Integration of Vocational Training into General Education as per Circular No. 01 of 1963

A notable feature of Circular No. 01 of 1963 was the introduction of "Work Training" as a compulsory subject for students in Grades 1 through 9. This initiative marked an important step toward integrating vocational education into the broader general education framework. In 1961, the first phase of administrative decentralization signified that schools should incorporate a variety of practical activities, including handicrafts, mechanical crafts, and agricultural education,

alongside vocational guidance. This policy shift demonstrated the government's commitment to embedding vocational training within the school system (National Institute of Education, 2009).

Furthermore, the establishment of agricultural laboratories and workshops in central colleges by 1965 illustrates the government's proactive approach to vocational education. These facilities, equipped with specialized tools, were designed to support hands-on learning and vocational development. In addition, the government recognized the need for proper infrastructure to support agricultural, commercial, and technical institutions, aiming to rectify existing gaps in secondary and higher education and promote a more balanced educational system. The overarching goal was to ensure the provision of a skilled workforce capable of meeting the demands of local industries, commercial sectors, and technical fields.

Introduction of Pre-Vocational Subjects

The introduction of pre-vocational subjects was a key feature of the 1972 education reforms, particularly in the context of vocational education. A clear distinction was made between vocational and pre-vocational subjects. Vocational subjects focus on teaching specific job skills, while pre-vocational subjects aim to equip students with general skills that are useful in various careers and everyday life. This broader approach reflects the government's commitment to preparing students for both professional and personal success.

Under the new system, seven periods were allocated to pre-vocational subjects, with each period focused on essential knowledge and skills. One period was dedicated to providing basic

knowledge about the country's natural resources, human resources, resource development, production levels, and the standard of living. Another period focused on training in geometric and mechanical drawing. These lessons were designed to be delivered in 15 to 18 sessions per year, helping students gain a foundational understanding of their country's resources and the importance of geometric and mechanical drawing skills (Wijesekera, 1970).

Pre-Vocational Subject 1 included various practical subjects such as agriculture, commerce, home economics, woodworking, metalworking, pottery, and textile industries. Pre-Vocational Subject II focused on teaching the main industries of a specific area, thus promoting local relevance and engagement. The teaching of these subjects followed a structured curriculum aimed at providing students with both theoretical and practical knowledge. Of the six periods allocated to these subjects, four were designated for hands-on, practical learning, while the remaining two periods were devoted to theoretical instruction (National Institute of Education, 2009).

In the case of Pre-Vocational Subject II, specific industries such as the gem industry, fishing industry, tile and brick production, reed bark product manufacturing, and the vine industry were integrated into the curriculum, focusing on local industries. These subjects were intended to help students connect with the industries in their own communities and learn about local economic activities (Wijesekera, 1970).

The goals of pre-vocational education were multifaceted:

- To teach skills applicable to any job, as well as those that are useful in everyday life.

- To foster a strong work culture among students.
- To create an environment conducive to the development of a child's personality, emphasizing qualities such as diligence, curiosity, self-confidence, perseverance, accuracy, and attention to detail through practical lessons.
- To gradually encourage respect for colleagues, the value of labour, and teamwork.
- To broaden the relationship between the child and their community, particularly through industrial education tailored to the local context.

Moreover, industrial education aimed to not only provide theoretical and practical knowledge but also to motivate students to engage in scientific research. This holistic approach sought to prepare students for future professional roles while fostering a strong sense of civic and community responsibility (Wijesekera, 1970).

1981 Education Reforms

The education reforms proposed in 1981 were designed with the objective of promoting the holistic development of students, ensuring that they were well-prepared for both societal participation and economic engagement. The curriculum at the junior secondary level was structured around the foundational idea that the knowledge and skills students acquire at the primary level should be reinforced and expanded upon. Additionally, this stage aimed to introduce students to basic skills relevant to vocational training, gradually orienting them toward the industrial sector. As part of this effort, new subjects titled "Applied Skills" were introduced to replace a number of existing technical subjects. These subjects were designed to bridge the

gap between general education and vocational training, providing students with practical skills that could be applied across various sectors (National Institute of Education, 2009).

At the senior secondary level, the importance of applied skills continued to be emphasized. The reform report indicated that a range of alternative technical subjects, such as woodworking, metalwork, agriculture, and home science, would be incorporated into the curriculum. This shift reflected the belief that general education should also provide the foundational training necessary for professional development. By integrating technical subjects into the broader educational framework, the reforms sought to ensure that vocational skills were accessible to all students as part of their general education, rather than being seen as separate or specialized tracks (Senadheera, 2008).

Sequential Technical Education Programme - 1991

The Sequential Technical Education Programme, launched by the Ministry of Education in 1991, marked a significant effort to align the country's education system with technological advancements. This initiative aimed to offer students the opportunity to pursue vocational certificate and diploma courses, ultimately leading to a Bachelor of Technology degree. The programme's foundation was laid by introducing junior certificate courses for Grade 9 students across all schools starting in 1991. These courses were structured around four broad subject areas: Agriculture, Commerce, Home Science, and Technical Skills, with each student required to select one of these courses in Grade 9 (National Institute of Education, 2009).

The programme had several key objectives:

1. To provide every student with the opportunity to pursue a technical course.
2. To offer a prerequisite qualification for admission to upper secondary education, technical colleges, and degree-awarding institutions in the field of technology.
3. To cultivate a positive attitude towards vocational and technical education.
4. To develop the innate technical and vocational skills of every student.
5. To offer new opportunities for students who may drop out of school for various reasons.
6. To ensure that all citizens acquire technical knowledge relevant to the scientific and technological era.

This approach provided both practical training and theoretical understanding, preparing students for post-school employment and a productive life. The curriculum was designed to equip students with the knowledge and skills essential for thriving in the 21st century's evolving workforce and technological landscape (National Institute of Education, 2009).

Education Reforms in 1998

In the period between 1997 and 1998, a series of educational reforms were introduced in Sri Lanka, aimed at enhancing the skills of students and preparing them to compete effectively in the economy. Among these reforms, particular attention was given to vocational education. A new subject, *Practical and Technical Skills*, was introduced for students in Grades 6-9, consisting of five distinct subject areas:

1. Food and Agriculture

2. Information Organization and Business
3. Construction and Manufacturing
4. Visual and Fine Arts
5. Musical and Performing Arts

Furthermore, technology education was incorporated into the curriculum for Grades 10-11 as a comprehensive subject, covering six distinct sectors:

1. Agricultural Sector
2. Handicrafts and Technical Skills Sector
3. Home Economics Sector

The continuous development of students' technical and practical skills was emphasized as a central objective within the education system. It was recognized that fostering these competencies from the earliest stages of education was crucial (National Institute of Education, 2009). To this end, the Presidential Task Force of the time recommended the following key measures to support the development of vocational and technical skills:

1. Learning through activities: Primary education was designed to prioritize hands-on learning experiences, encouraging children to experiment and engage in practical activities.
2. Junior secondary education: Junior secondary schools were tasked with fostering practical skills in areas such as food, clothing, housing, healthcare, information gathering, and communication.

3. Revised science and technology syllabus: The syllabus for Science and Technology at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level was revised to better align with the evolving needs of the economy.
4. Introduction of a technology stream at the G.C.E. Advanced Level: A new technology stream was introduced at the G.C.E. Advanced Level, covering areas such as agriculture, industry, commerce, services, and vocational education.
5. Emphasis on practical and project-based work: Practical work and project-based activities were integrated into the curriculum, as they were recognized as essential for the development of technical skills.

The Presidential Performance Report (1997) further emphasized the need for schools to organize a greater variety of co-curricular activities, thereby offering students additional opportunities to cultivate and refine their skills. However, it is noteworthy that during this period, the education system lacked a structured approach to counseling and career guidance, which was identified as an area requiring further development.

Changes in the Education System after 1998

The National Education Commission, under its 1991 report (No. 19 of 1991), identified a significant gap between education and employment, which contributed to high levels of unemployment and dissatisfaction among school dropouts. The Commission also highlighted the negative impact of disengaged teachers, ineffective teaching methods, and a curriculum that failed to address the needs of a wide range of students.

The Commission's report emphasized that the existing curriculum for Grades 6–11 primarily benefited those students pursuing academic education, particularly those aiming for university entrance. However, it was observed that there was little consideration for students who passed the university entrance exams but were unable to attend university, as well as for those who failed these exams altogether. The report posed a critical question: What would be the future of these students, who represent a significant portion of the country's most valuable human resources? The Commission argued that while much attention was given to students who excelled in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level and G.C.E. Advanced Level exams, the system largely ignored those who struggled with these exams, placing the future of this group in jeopardy (National Institute of Education, 2009).

In response to these challenges, the 1998 education reforms introduced several initiatives aimed at improving technical and vocational education. These included the creation of a new technology stream for the GCE Advanced Level in the fields of agriculture, industry, commerce, services, and vocational education. The reforms also emphasized the development of technical skills, practical work, and project-based activities, marking a shift towards a more hands-on approach to education.

One of the core elements of the 1998 reforms was the alignment of educational objectives with national development goals. The National Education Commission's Report (2003) highlighted the sixth of eight national objectives, which emphasized the importance of vocational education for students.

4th Common Competency:

- Contribute to economic development
- Identify one's career interests and challenges
- Improve employability skills to maximize one's potential and increase capacity to choose a job that suits one's abilities, enabling a gainful and sustainable livelihood.

These reforms underscored the need to connect students more directly with the workforce, equipping them with the skills and knowledge necessary to contribute to the country's economic development while providing them with sustainable career paths (National Institute of Education, 2009).

Curriculum Reforms of 2007

The curriculum reforms introduced in 2007 focused on adapting the education system to meet the demands of the modern world, especially in light of globalization and the emerging information age.

The key objectives of these reforms included:

1. **Preparing Youth for the Information Age:** The reforms aimed to equip students with the skills necessary to thrive in the rapidly changing global landscape. This involved ensuring that students were prepared for the challenges and opportunities presented by technological advancements and the digital economy.

2. Streamlining and Updating Subjects: Several subjects were removed from the existing curriculum to streamline it, while new group subjects were introduced to better align with modern educational needs. These subjects included:
 - I. Entrepreneurship Studies
 - II. Agricultural and Food Technology
 - III. Design and Technology
 - IV. Home Economics
 - V. Communication and Media Studies
 - VI. Fisheries and Food Technology
 - VII. Crafts
 - VIII. Languages
 - IX. Information and Communication Technology (ICT)
 - X. Electronic Documentation and Logging
3. Updating Subject Content: The content of all subjects was updated to reflect current knowledge and practices, ensuring that the curriculum remained relevant and useful for students preparing for the contemporary job market.
4. Providing Pathways to Vocational and Professional Education: The reforms also aimed to offer students clear pathways to specific career sectors. For instance, sections on food technology were added to support entry into hotel schools, while home management content provided a foundation for those interested in entering home industries. Additionally, training in document preparation using computer applications was

introduced to develop skills in creating high-quality documents, which is essential for various professional fields.

Overall, the 2007 curriculum reforms sought to modernize education by introducing new subjects, updating content, and providing students with practical skills and knowledge relevant to their future careers, particularly in vocational and technological fields (National Education Commission, 2016).

Thirteen-Year General Education Programme (13YGEP) - 2017

In 2017, the Ministry of Education introduced 13YGEP, also known as the Vocational Stream for Grades 12 and 13, as outlined in Ministry of Education Circular 37/2017. This initiative aimed to provide continuous education to all school children from Grade 1 through Grade 13, ensuring they have the opportunity to access a vocational education stream (National Institute of Education, 2009).

The programme's central objective was to offer vocational education that prepares students to face future challenges, regardless of whether they passed or failed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. As part of this reform, a new vocational stream comprising 26 subjects was introduced, in addition to the six subject streams previously established for the G.C.E. Advanced Level.

The main components and objectives of 13YGEP include:

1. **Inclusive Access to Education:** The programme ensures that all students, regardless of their performance in the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination, can pursue the vocational stream and receive thirteen years of continuous education.
2. **Flexible Learning Opportunities:** Students entering the vocational stream have the flexibility to choose vocational subjects that align with their interests, local employment opportunities, and practical training prospects. This allows for the development of skills relevant to the labour market or further education.
3. **Vocational Subjects for Job Readiness:** The curriculum introduces subjects that meet the demands of both local and international job markets, with an emphasis on promoting traditional industries and regional agricultural development.

13YGEP aims to provide students with the following opportunities:

- **Practical Skill Development:** Students will gain vocational skills that are directly applicable in the job market.
- **Professional Competence:** The programme enables students to pursue their own professional activities after completing their studies.
- **Career Flexibility:** Students can choose vocational subjects based on personal interests, local job opportunities, and the availability of practical training.

The vocational stream is divided into three main content areas:

1. General Subject Area

2. Applied Subject Area

3. Corporate Vocational Training

Although the vocational subject stream was introduced in schools with a number of objectives in mind, it has been observed that there are significant discrepancies in its implementation across different schools. These discrepancies arise from several factors, including uneven distribution of resources, failure to implement the stream in all schools offering Advanced Level classes, differences in administrative and management styles, and a lack of targeted efforts to attract students who fail the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. These challenges hinder the uniform development of vocational education and limit its potential to provide equal opportunities to all students (National Institute of Education, 2018).

Existing Research

This study adds to the growing body of literature on the vocational approach in school curricula, drawing from previous research by Jayaratne and Prabodhani (2024), Hunushej et al. (2016), Maurer (2012), Chakrawarty et al. (2019), Biragya (2021), Miller (2020), and Swaris (2022). Much of the existing literature focuses on educational reforms implemented up to 1998, while research on more recent developments, particularly the introduction of 13YGEP, remains sparse. This gap can largely be attributed to the limited time since the introduction of 13YGEP. 13YGEP marks a clear distinction between vocational and academic education, offering a new approach that integrates both educational paths rather than segregating them. Examining this model will shed

light on the potential benefits and challenges of delivering both academic and vocational education within an integrated framework.

Despite these findings, Jayaratne and Prabodhani (2024) also note that both groups: those who followed the vocational programme after failing the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination, and those who did not were equally employable. However, those who completed the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination and entered the workforce might have compensated for the lack of vocational education through work experience.

Other studies, such as those by Chakravarty et al., (2019) support the notion that individuals with Vocational Education and Training (VET) are generally more employable than those without it. Jayaratne and Prabodhani (2024) argue that the participants of 13YGEP, having only recently entered the job market with 1-2 years of experience, may still be in the early stages of their careers, suggesting that the observed employment results could be a short-term trend.

Further, while some studies, such as Hanushek et al., (2017) have shown that vocationally trained individuals secure employment faster than those with general education qualifications. Jayaratne and Prabodhani (2024) focused on comparing vocationally trained students to school dropouts. Their findings suggest that while students who did not register for 13YGEP often entered the workforce immediately after the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination, possibly driven by economic necessity, they earned more than those who followed the programme, equating their work experience with vocational education.

Interestingly, the study also highlighted that students who followed 13YGEP are more likely to become self-employed, which is seen as a positive indicator that the vocational stream is heading in the right direction. This aligns with the Government of Sri Lanka's commitment, as outlined in "Vision 2025," to transform the country into a knowledge hub by expanding vocational training opportunities and ensuring that every student has access to 13 years of education, as outlined in the proposed Education Reforms of 2018. The Government's efforts to adapt the education system to the labour market's needs and student aspirations are reflected in the policy of providing compulsory education for thirteen years, as noted in the Central Bank Report (2017).

Edirisinghe (2016) examined the vocational aspirations of the Arts stream students in both rural and urban areas, concluding that schools exhibit limited commitment in providing vocational knowledge, with insufficient contributions to the development of vocational skills among students. Similarly, Senadheera (1998) conducted a study on employability skills through secondary school dissemination in Sri Lanka, based on a sample of 240 students and 120 teachers from six schools in the Kandy and Nuwara Eliya Districts. His findings revealed that the subjects and teaching methods currently employed in schools fail to adequately equip students with vocational skills. Hewapathirana (1997), in her research on the need for vocational skills within the secondary school curriculum and the potential role of technology in addressing this gap, identified a significant issue within the Sri Lankan education system. Specifically, nearly 80% of students who fail the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination enter the workforce as job seekers without possessing vocational skills.

Discussion

The findings of this narrative review highlight that the integration of career-oriented and vocational education into Sri Lanka's general education system has been a long-standing policy objective, yet one that has not been consistently realized in practice. Historical and policy evidence demonstrates that successive curriculum reforms have repeatedly acknowledged the importance of practical skills, work orientation, and career readiness. However, the persistence of academically driven pathways and examination-focused schooling continues to marginalize vocational education within the school system. The introduction of 13YGEP represents a significant attempt to address early school dropout and improve employability among students who fail the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. Despite its inclusive policy intent, the programme's implementation has been uneven. Census data reveal a substantial mismatch between the number of students eligible for the vocational stream and those actually enrolled, suggesting systemic barriers such as limited school availability, inadequate awareness, social stigma attached to vocational education, and insufficient career guidance at the secondary level. The review also indicates that while vocational education has the potential to enhance employability and promote self-employment, short-term labour market outcomes alone may not fully capture its long-term value. Findings from recent studies suggest that early employment among school leavers may temporarily offset the advantages of vocational training; however, vocational education is more likely to contribute to sustainable livelihoods, career mobility, and entrepreneurial capacity over time.

Furthermore, the absence of structured monitoring, stakeholder engagement, and school–industry linkages weaken the effectiveness of 13YGEP. Strengthening these areas, alongside expanding vocational subject offerings and ensuring equitable resource distribution, is critical. Overall, the discussion underscores the need to move beyond policy formulation toward coherent, well-supported implementation to ensure that vocational education meaningfully contributes to both individual career development and national economic growth.

Conclusion

This narrative review examined the evolution of career-oriented education in Sri Lanka and critically assessed the implementation of the Thirteen-Year Guaranteed Education Programme (13YGEP) within the broader context of curriculum reforms. The review demonstrates that vocational and work-oriented education has long been recognized as an essential component of national development, evident from pre-colonial apprenticeship systems through successive reforms introduced during the colonial and post-independence periods. Despite repeated policy efforts to integrate vocational education into general schooling, implementation has remained inconsistent and uneven.

The introduction of 13YGEP in 2017 represents a significant policy milestone aimed at addressing early school dropouts and improving employability among students who fail the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. However, the review reveals substantial gaps between policy intentions and practice. Low student enrollment in the vocational stream, limited school coverage, inadequate career guidance, and unequal resource distribution continue to constrain the programme’s

effectiveness. Census data further indicate that only a small proportion of eligible students are currently benefiting from 13YGEP, undermining its potential impact.

Existing literature suggests that vocational education can enhance employability, promote self-employment, and support economic development. Nevertheless, empirical evidence on the long-term outcomes of 13YGEP remains limited due to its relatively recent implementation. This highlights the need for systematic evaluation, expansion of vocational subject streams, and stronger alignment between education policy and labour market needs. Overall, strengthening career guidance, improving institutional capacity, and incorporating stakeholder perspectives are essential to ensure that vocational education fulfills its intended role within Sri Lanka's general education system and contributes meaningfully to sustainable national development.

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