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## **EDUCATION AS A COMMODITY: A STUDY OF POSITION OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN SRI LANKAN VALUE SYSTEM**

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### **Abstract**

*Higher education is considered as one of the most important empowerment tool in Sri Lankan value system since it is believed to have a direct link with financial status, social standards and self-development. Considering that it plays an important role in Sri Lankan value system, this paper aims to find out the level of importance given to higher education among different classes, genders and ethnic groups in Sri Lanka. As means to explore this area, method of survey with questionnaires and interviews has been used with a random sample of 100 people. As a result of this study, it was found that citizens of Sri Lanka who belongs to working class lacks the information and the interest for higher education for all the genders, the citizens of middle class are determined to pursue masters level and doctoral level of education and the upper class citizens are determined to follow only until bachelors' level of education. Hence the findings can be summarized that higher education is not much valued in working class where as it plays a main role in middle class whilst it is only valued as a secondary goal next to money and status in upper class value system.*

## **Keywords**

Higher Education; Value System; Classes; Genders; Ethnic Group

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## **1. Introduction**

Higher education is one of the major criterion in measuring the development of an individual as well as the development of the country because it is valued as one of the great empowerment tool from the past (Ariyawasna, 2013). The value given to education in Sri Lanka is much higher compared to the other third world countries as its literacy rate is 92% (Ministry of higher education and cultural affairs, 2018). But there is a huge drop in this rate when it comes to higher education. It is reported that approximately only 60% of the students passes the GCE A/L examinations every year and only 15 -17% of students are selected to government universities (Ministry of education, 2013). But the chances for the access of higher education in Sri Lanka has been broaden by government recently by giving permission for few institutes to grant their own degrees and recognizing the degree programs offered by a number of public and private institutions under the supervision of university Grants Commission (University grants commission, 2018). Even though government has increased the chances for the access of higher education in Sri Lanka, there is still a huge disparity between the pass and fail rates and the amount of students who engage in higher education every year. It was found out that this disparity has a close link with the social standards of people. Many researches have been done around the world in the past to understand the connection between the social standards of people and its link with the higher education. A survey was carried out to find this connection in Sri Lanka and it has proved that there is a strong connection between the social standards of people depending on their economic class, gender, and ethnicity among the people of Sri Lanka and the value they give to the higher education. This paper will deeply analyze the position of higher education in the Sri Lankan value system with the sociological differences related to economic class, gender and ethnicity.

## **2. Literature Review**

The role of higher education in the economy of a country and an individual is a widely known fact and it has been proved by a lot of researches done in the past that higher education plays a pivotal role in the economy of the country as well as the individual. Even though it is closely linked with the economic status, it is impossible to deny the connection between the

access of higher education and the social standards of people (Kromydas, 2017). Economic class plays a major role in social standards of people. The three main classes which are working class, middle class and upper class have a huge impact in the value system regarding higher education (Wyatt-Nichol, Brown & Haynes, 2011). In many countries, education policies are implemented related to the economic class systems (Whitty, 2010). Researches done in the past shows that student from the working class backgrounds are less likely to have access to the higher education in comparison with the students from middle class backgrounds even though there is not much difference shown in the level of performance once they get access to the higher education (Lynch & O'riordan, 2006). Also it was found out that that students with upper class backgrounds are more likely to have high expectations, goals and performance approaches related to higher education than the students from working class backgrounds even though these goals, expectations and performance approaches related to higher education in upper class backgrounds are low in comparison to the middle class background students (Berger & Archer, 2015). U.S department of education has come up with the conclusion from their research that students with higher socioeconomic families which consist of high school graduate parents have the greater chances of finishing their higher education successfully (Gollnick & Chinn, 2009). The main reasons for the less interest and value for the higher education in working class found from the researches are poverty, lack of encouragement from family and lack of role models (Rubin, 2012).

The other important element of social standard which affects the access of higher education is ethnicity. Sri Lanka has four major ethnic groups where the majority is Sinhalese, second majority is Tamils which consists of both Sri Lankan and Indian origin Tamils and then Sri Lankan Moors and others. From the researches done by Sri Lankan government with the undergraduate university admission in government universities, it was found out that majority of students who got admission to the university were Sinhala students who are the ethnic majority of Sri Lanka which was followed by Tamils who are the second major ethnic group and then by Moors and other ethnic minorities (University grants commission, 2016).

The third important element of social standard which influences the position higher education in Sri Lankan value system is gender. Even though there was a 30 percentage gender gap in the literacy levels in 1901 it has dropped down to 3 percentage in 2001 (Department of census and statistics, 2012). Researches have proved that the female students who get the access

to higher education is slightly lower than males and there is no much gender influence in areas of higher education in Sri Lanka (University grants commission, 2018).

The impact of the elements of social standards which are economic class, ethnicity and gender in the value and access of higher education has been thoroughly studied individually in the past. However, further study of the effects of combination of all three elements of social standard together in higher education in Sri Lankan society will lead to more clear understanding. Because of this reason following research question is raised.

Research Question: How does the social standard of ethnicity, economic class and gender affects the value given to higher education system in Sri Lanka?

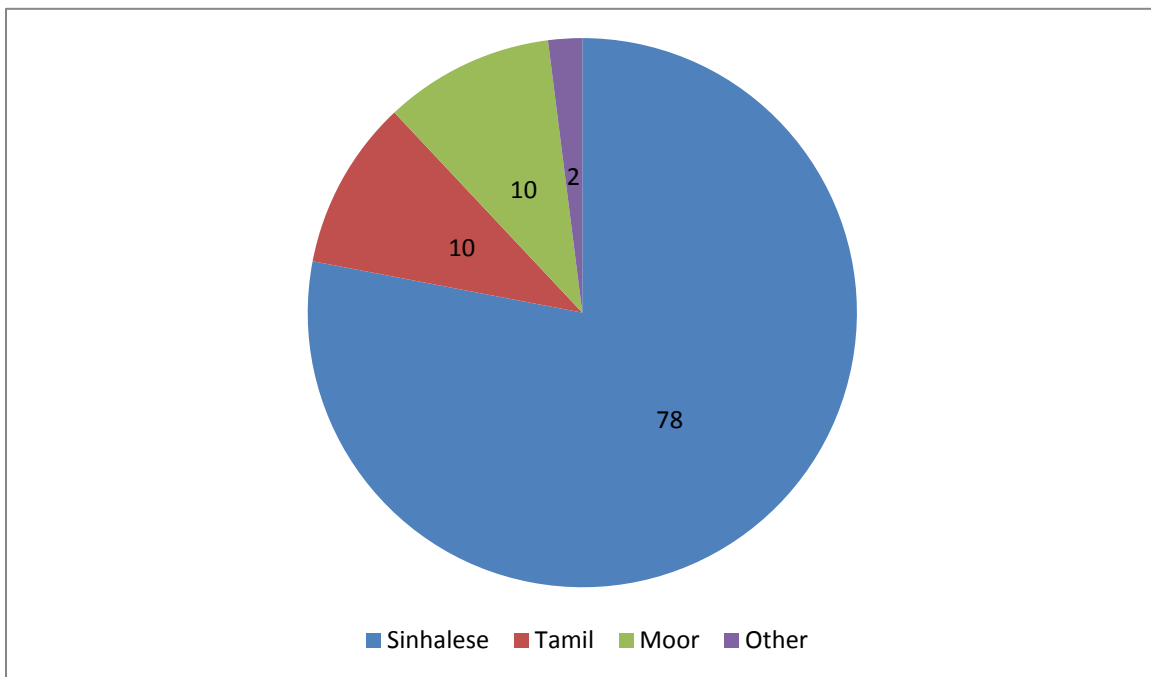
### **3. Methodology**

To answer this research question, with the help of the literature related to this topic, it was found out that survey method will be the best method to find data for this research in comparison to other methods. This method was selected not only to find out the answer for the research question but also to find out the opinion of large number of samples regarding the value of higher education in a limited time. For this research a random sample of 100 people were chosen from different backgrounds. Samples differed in age, gender, economic class and ethnicity. After getting the consents from these samples they were given a questionnaire with another letter explaining the purpose and the guidelines of the research. Participants were also verbally informed regarding the purpose and the guidelines of research before they participated in the research. Questionnaires were made with both close ended and open ended questions regarding their background, interest in education, value they give to higher education and their qualifications. In that questionnaire with the choice questions and open ended questions, the participants were also given scale to rate the value they give to higher education to find the connection between their social standards and the value they give to the higher education. From the participants who took part in the survey, 38 of them were interviewed randomly with their consent right after they filled the questionnaire to get know their opinions regarding the value of higher education. Then the data collected from these surveys were analyzed statistically to find out the correlation between the position of higher education in the Sri Lankan value system related to the economic class, gender, and the ethnicity of participants to come to a conclusion. The information from the interviews were taped with the consent of the participants for the future research purposes.

#### 4. Discussion

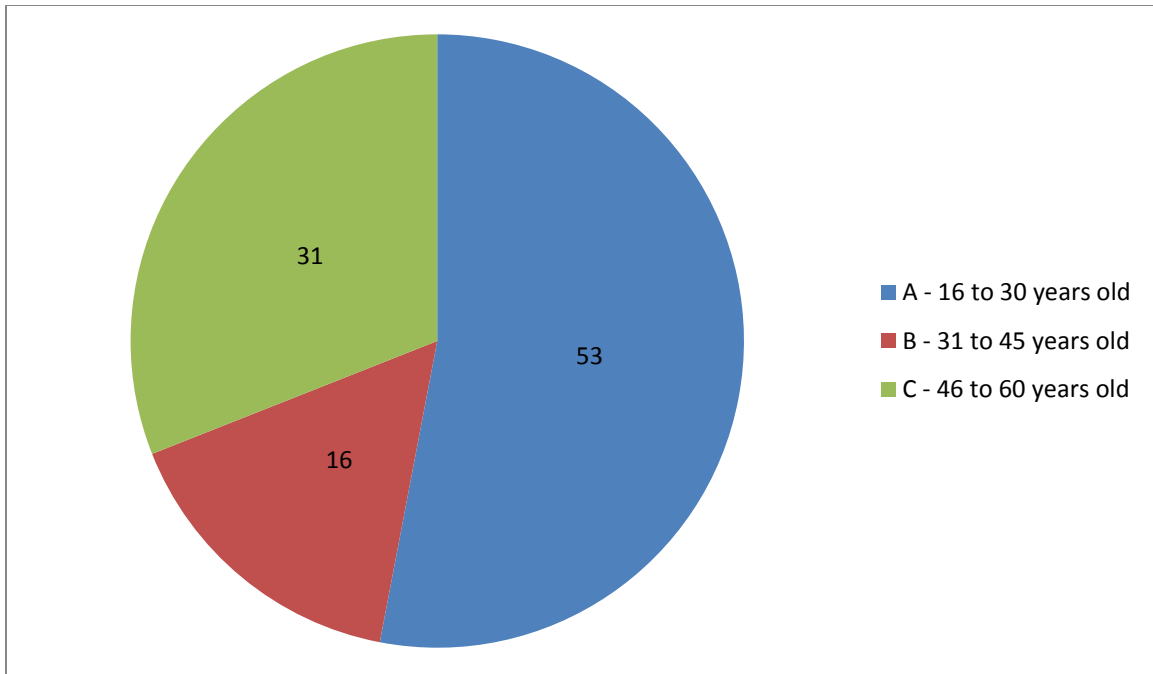
The data for this study was obtained from a random sample of 100 people in Colombo suburb area. Geographically, it is located in the west coast as the financial capital of the country. Demographically, this area considered as large and diverse since the area itself a cosmopolitan with a mix of different ethnic groups belong to various classes, genders and socioeconomic status that are seen island wide.

The correlation analysis is used as a statistical tool to analyze the data that were collected by the questionnaire. The data which includes the ethnicity, age, economic class and gender was taken as one variable and higher education was taken as the other variable of this analysis.



**Figure 1:** Sample Population

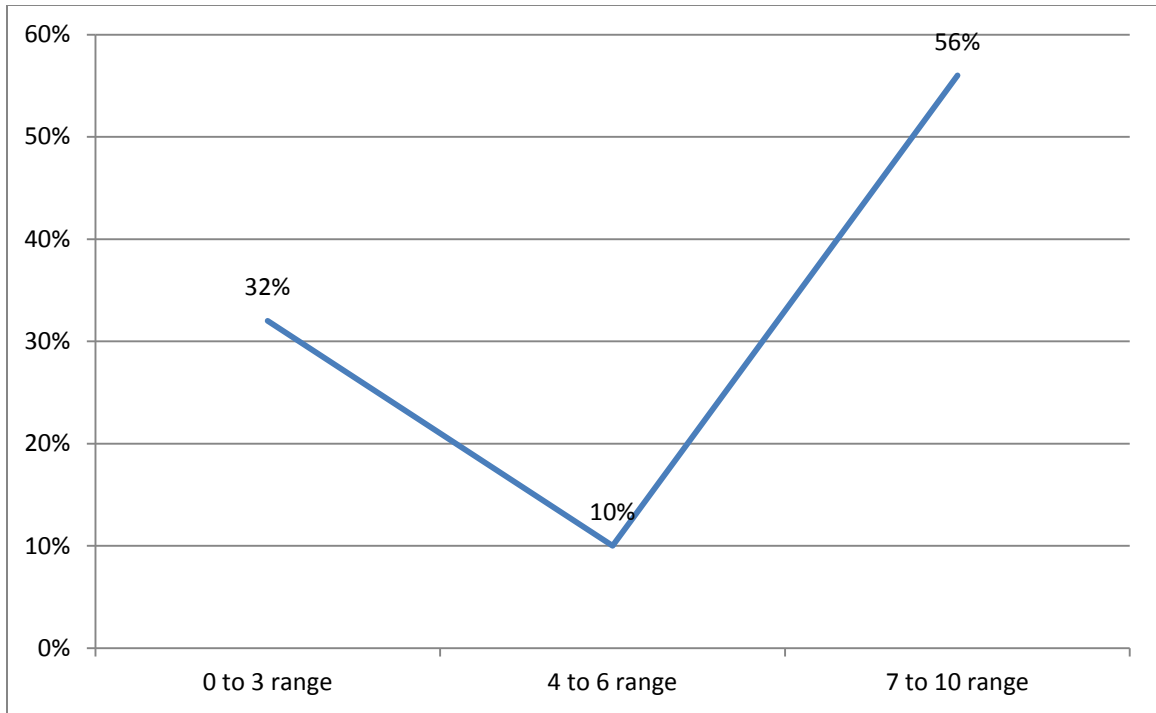
The population sample used in this study included 78 Sinhalese citizens, 10 Tamil citizens, 10 Moor citizen and 2 other minorities. When regarding the gender variation of the population, there were 42 Sinhalese males, 36 Sinhalese females, 3 Tamil males, 7 Tamil females, 5 Moor males, 5 Moor females, 1 other male and 1 other female.



**Figure 2:** *Categories of Age Groups*

Considered age group for this study consisted with 16 to 60 years old in 3 categories, category A had 53 participants in the age group of 16 – 30 years old, category B consisted of 16 participants in the age group of 31 – 45 years old and category C consisted with another 31 participants from 46 – 60 years age group.

In the survey question (SQ no.8) the participants were asked to rate the value of higher education from their opinion in the scale of 0 to 10. 56% of the participants have rated in 7 to 10 range, while 32% of the participants answered by rating in 0 to 3 range, another 10% answered by rating in 4 to 6 range and 2% of the participants have not answered the question.



**Figure 3:** Rates on Value of Higher Education

When considering the ethnic variation with economic class and acquired educational background, there was a significant correlation with the ethnicity & economic class and the acquired higher education. It was shown that participants of middle class backgrounds are either hoping to pursue or already acquired masters' level or doctoral level of education while participants belong to the upper class only have hopes to follow until bachelors' level of education. When questioned in the interview sections, they gave their opinion saying that bachelor's level of education is enough for them to get the social acceptance they need in their life. Participants who belonged to the working class did not show much importance to higher education. Most of them were only with their GCE O/Ls or GCE A/Ls building their careers from the ground level or self-employed such as owning repair shops, grocery shops, communication shops, ect.

Within the participants of the survey, gender did not play a key role in impacting the personal value on the higher education; both the male and female participants value higher education in similar manner. Hence the study results can be summarized that higher education is not much valued in working class, where as it has a significant importance in middle class whilst in upper class, it is valued as only an option to climb up within their social class.

#### **4.1. Limitations**

This study was conducted in the Colombo suburb area hence the findings are limited and cannot be applicable to the whole island hence further researches must be conducted with more capacity to engage both rural and remote areas of the country.

When considering the variation of the ethnicities of the sample population, participants from the ethnic groups of Tamil, Moor and other were lacking in comparison to the Sinhalese majority. Hence it creates a limitation of insufficient participants from minorities in the sample population to deduce generalized linkage between ethnicity and higher education.

It was shown that most of the participants, who belong to working class and middle class backgrounds, lack information and the knowledge regarding the various pathways that are available in current higher education system in Sri Lanka since many ways and opportunities have been introduced within the past two decades for the Sri Lankan citizens to acquire primary degree or similar higher education qualifications as in western countries and the information related to these pathways have not been reached to the citizens properly. Yet there is a great improvement compared to the past. But lack of information and knowledge of the participants regarding these path ways was a significant limitation when it comes to this research in higher education.

Another limitation was that sub cultures within the main ethnic groups and the caste system that falls under that, influence the decision making regarding the life goals and value of higher education. Many people stop their education with either GCE O/L or GCE A/L due to the pressure they receive from their family and social background.

#### **4.2. Scope for Future Research**

From the findings of value of higher education in Sri Lankan society the following questions arise; why is there a significant disparity between working class and middle class when it comes to higher education? Does it have a relationship with how the resources are allocated according to the national schools, semi government schools, and other government schools? Why there is lack of value in higher education among the Sri Lankans who belongs to the working class since Sri Lanka is a country with free education system up to higher education. To find out answers to these questions, government should allocate more funding from the budget for higher education.

It is clear that the education is a commodity. And it's something that plays a significant role in average Sri Lankans' life. Higher education is considered as a stepping stone among



middle class citizens' which makes way to achieve their goals and dreams. The past research shows that university graduates with IT skills, leadership qualities, analytical ability, team work and interpersonal relations have a high demand in the Sri Lankan job market with higher salaries and higher social standards (Ariyawansa, 2013).

Furthermore, the government should implement new policies regarding availability of higher education with the technology that agree with current job market and provide student loans for those who doesn't get the opportunity to study in public universities and institutions to get private education that they require with low interest rates. This would increase the probability of increase in value given to the higher education among working class citizens.

## **5. Conclusion**

The findings of the study can be summarized that the working class citizens does not value the higher education as much as middle class citizens value it. For middle class citizens' higher education is a stepping stone to climb up the socioeconomic ladder hence it has a significant importance in middle class society as the main objective of their life. Whilst in upper class, it is only an option or a secondary goal to achieve in life in order to gain the ability to move up within their social class. In upper class, money and statuses are considered as more important than the higher education in their value system. It is shown that a person's ethnicity also plays an important role when it comes to opportunities of pursuing higher education in Sri Lankan society, but there is no significant link between the gender and higher education. Hence higher education helps societies to narrow the income gap by aiding the people to reach social mobility. It's an opportunity offered to working class and middle class citizens to break away from their own class and ethnic constrictions and move up in the socioeconomic ladder according to their capabilities and aspirations. It increases self-efficiency of population and number of responsible citizens who are capable of participating in decision making process of the country. Hence the findings of this research proves that even though gender doesn't make a huge impact in the value and the access of higher education, the other social standards of ethnicity and economic class has a significant impact in the position of higher education in Sri Lankan value system.

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