

# Highlights from the Sri Lanka Education Symposium 2025

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Dialogue. Innovation.  
Equity in Education.

3 June  
Cinnamon Lakeside,  
Colombo

## Symposium Structure and Purpose

The British Council, in collaboration with the Ministry of Education, organised the **Sri Lanka Education Symposium 2025**. The event saw 100 policymakers, education leaders, private sector experts, and development partners convening to explore the future of English education, teaching quality, and digital learning in **an effort to support national education reform**.

The in-person, day-long symposium was held at King's Court, Cinnamon Lakeside, Colombo 02 on 3 June, 2025.

The symposium brought together key stakeholders to explore pathways to a more inclusive, future-ready education system in Sri Lanka. It featured a rich blend of moderated panel discussions, interactive polls, mini social collaborations, and networking opportunities. The event was anchored by an opening dialogue with the Secretary to the Ministry of Education, Higher Education and Vocational Education. A keynote address by Her Excellency, the Prime Minister of Sri Lanka, further underscored the national commitment to equitable and transformative education reform.

Children everywhere, want to be listened to and heard.

“There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.”

Nelson Mandela

## Conference Opening

In her welcome address, Kate Joyce, Director, Education, Arts and English, British Council, South Asia, highlighted the need to reimagine **education as a transformative system**, and not merely as a knowledge-delivery method. She emphasised that **true inclusion** ensures every child is embraced and supported, especially the marginalised, and encouraged collaborative resource pooling to transform education effectively.

The welcome address was followed by the ceremonial lighting of the traditional oil lamp and the singing of the national anthem. This opening was led by representatives from the Ministry of Education, the British Council, the British High Commission, and panel discussion speakers.

In a special address, His Excellency Andrew Patrick, British High Commissioner to Sri Lanka, highlighted that education is a key component of the longstanding UK–Sri Lanka relationship, alongside tourism and exports. He reaffirmed the **UK's strong commitment to supporting education in Sri Lanka**.

### Symposium Theme: Collaboration, Innovation and Equity in Education

Orlando Edwards, Country Director, British Council Sri Lanka, and Sarah Rogerson, Director of Schools, British Council, South Asia, reiterated the **British Council's continued commitment to high-quality education**.

# Opening Dialogue

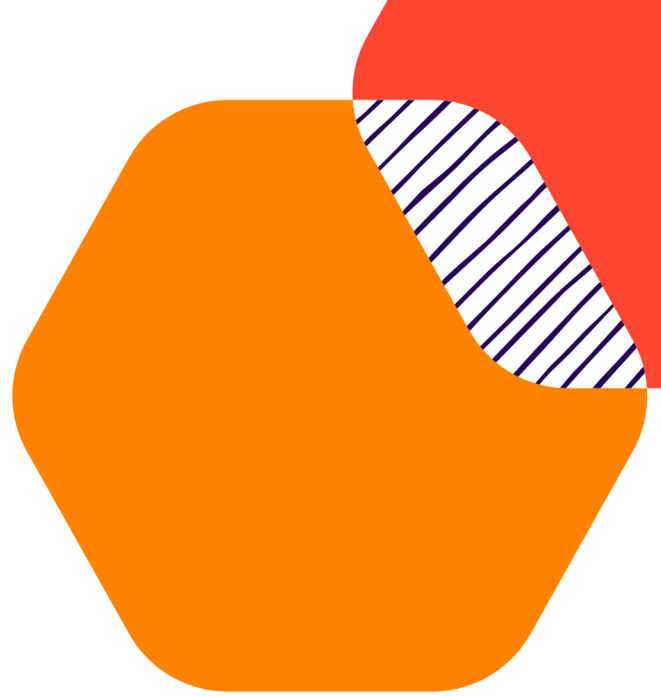
The conversation focused on the strengths of the Sri Lankan education system; particularly its foundation of free education, high primary enrollment, and gender parity. Key discussion points included:

- **Inclusion:** The Ministry views inclusion as a process of incorporating diversity through language, religion, ethnicity, gender, and learning dynamics. The national education policy framework promotes pluralism, multiethnic curricula, and trilingual proficiency. Moving forward, flexible pathways, including vocational training, aim to reduce dropout rates.
- **Challenges:** The disconnect between policy and practice, the crucial role of teachers in promoting inclusion, and the digital divide were identified as key challenges. Financial and resource limitations, particularly in the estate sector, further exacerbated access disparities.
- **Solutions:** Mr. Kaluwewe emphasised the need for a policy shift towards inclusivity, shared responsibility among stakeholders, and implementation that is accountable. He highlighted the value of collaboration with organisations like the British Council to address limitations, particularly in technology.
- **Q&A Highlights:** Using practical, employability-focused approaches to transforming English education in classrooms, clarifying the role of school leaders in reform, teacher performance assessment by the National Institute of Education (NIE), feasibility of trilingual education despite human resource challenges, and addressing the persistent barrier of social stigma to achieving equity.

## In Dialogue:

**Anju Moses**,  
Head of English  
and School  
Education at the  
British Council  
and  
**Nalaka  
Kaluwewe**,  
Secretary of the  
Ministry of  
Education,  
Higher Education  
and Vocational  
Education.

The dialogue provided insights into the current state of inclusive education in Sri Lanka, outlined future plans, and highlighted how development partners, civil society, and the private sector can contribute to more accelerated progress.



# Keynote Address

Hon. Dr. Harini Amarasuriya,  
Prime Minister and Minister of Education, Higher Education and Vocational  
Education, Sri Lanka

The Prime Minister's address championed an inclusive, equitable, and future-ready education system in Sri Lanka, highlighting the need for collaborative efforts across sectors and disciplines, with teachers and school leaders at the forefront. She thanked the British Council for its longstanding initiatives, expressing hope that it continues to serve as a space for cultural enrichment for all.

- **New Education Reforms:** Starting in 2026, these reforms aim to reduce the anxieties associated with the fear of speaking (Sri Lankan) English; encouraging communication over rigid grammar.
- **Assessment:** The reforms will integrate school-based formative assessments into the learning process.
- **Teacher Training:** Emphasis will be placed on modernised teacher training programmes (curriculum unchanged for 16 years) to prepare teachers for English-medium instruction. Sustained professional development programmes and monitoring and evaluation methods will ensure trainings align with changing needs.
- **Digital Education:** A task force will be established to address digital education, including curriculum, teacher training, and online safety. Technology will be used to bridge the digital divide through pre- and in-service teacher training. Training institutions will be equipped with better tech resources and safety measures.
- **Expansion of English-Medium Schools:** The formulation of a bilingual language policy plans to increase the number of English-medium schools from 825 to 1,000. Numbers of teachers trained will be enhanced through the Postgraduate Institute for English (PGIE).
- **English for Opportunity, Not Inequality:** The government aims to ensure all students, regardless of geography or background, have equitable access to English education, repositioning it as a tool for expanding access and social mobility - not a marker of class or privilege.
- **National Languages:** Strong native language skills are foundational for second language acquisition. At the higher education level, many students struggle with language use, possibly due to an overemphasis on STEM, potentially neglecting core literacy and numeracy development
- **Public Awareness:** Recognising educators as vital stakeholders is necessary for the successful implementation of new reforms.
- **Modernisation:** While the free education system is a success, modernisation is needed and requires deeper cross-sector collaboration across ministries, provincial departments, development partners and the private sector.

## Collaborative Sessions & Polls

Participant input was ensured through creative tools such as *Mentimeter* polls and focused Q&A sessions. Interestingly, the ideas generated by these interactive exercises resonated with the symposium's core themes, frequently used by speakers and panelists during discussions.

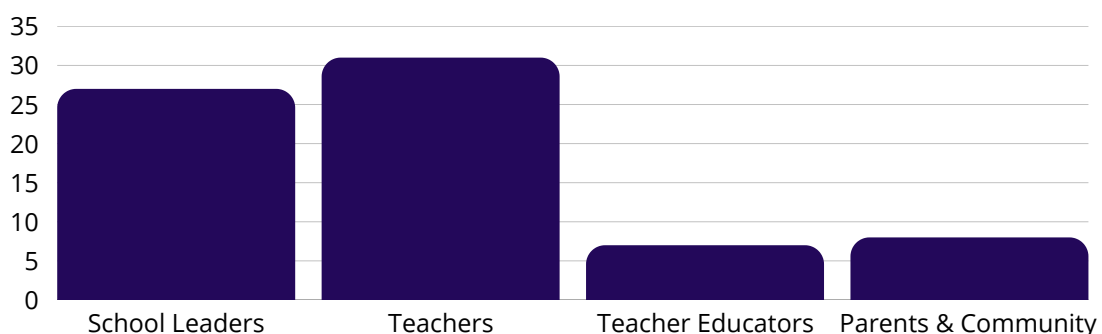
**Question 1:**  
**Describe your favourite teacher in three words**



**Question 2:**  
What are the top three words that come to mind when you hear the term 'inclusive education'?



### Question 3: Who should take the lead in driving inclusion in schools?



# Panel Discussion 1

## Governance for Inclusive Education: Policies, Practices & Priorities

The role of technology, early childhood enrollment, international models for inclusive education, teacher professional development, and their economic impact were discussed. Key highlights included:

- **Economic System & Education:** There is strong potential to strengthen Sri Lanka's education system by increasing investments and enhancing its alignment with entrepreneurial, economic and employability needs, particularly through closer collaboration between industry and academia.
- **Technology's Role:** *Tech is a tool to enhance learning experiences and accessibility is key*, with AI offering potential for improved education quality. Caution is advised against digitising outdated processes and over-investing in hardware.
- **Early Childhood & SEL:** The current education model is outdated. Reintroducing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is vital for peaceful problem-solving, empathy, and critical thinking. Curriculum changes promoting self-acceptance and peaceful conflict resolution are needed.
- **International Models:** *Inclusion is a mindset, not a checklist.* Implementation should be locally driven. Frameworks for special education needs and multi-language education are effective, as are low-tech solutions in remote areas.
- **Teacher Preparation:** Focus on English language proficiency is crucial for global engagement of both learners and teachers, with innovative solutions needed to address severe teacher shortages. Strengthening the continuous and sustained professional development of teachers and existing training institutions is necessary.
- **Q&A Highlights:** The need for government coordination to avoid duplication of efforts, creating an environment to embrace AI in education, addressing the funding imbalance between higher education and other levels, promoting teacher motivation through remuneration and recognition, providing low-tech support for (English as a Second Language (ESL)), and addressing comprehensive sexuality education were all raised. Vocational training and internships can help students find career paths, while creativity should be fostered, and English skills promoted.

### Moderator:

**Anju Moses**

British Council

### Panelists:

**Ms. Iroshi**

**Paranagama**

Chief Commissioner  
for Teacher Education,  
Ministry of Education

**Sanjaya Ariyawanse**

Senior Economist, The  
Ceylon Chamber of  
Commerce

**Hasitha Dela**

Co-Founder/CTO,  
Headstart

**Sarah Rogerson**

Regional Director,  
English and School  
Education, British  
Council

**Aritha**

**Wickremasinghe**

Attorney at Law/  
Advisor to Western  
Province Governor



# Panel Discussion 2

## Rethinking Education Pathways for a More Inclusive Future

Language equity, digital integration, skills & career pathways, and inclusive learning models for a flexible education system were discussed, highlighting:

- **Use of English:** Disparities in English language learning persist, especially between urban and rural areas, due to a shortage of trained teachers in rural schools. Strengthening English at the primary level, without compromising mother tongue proficiency, is essential. Reforms include expanding bilingual schools and enhancing teacher training.
- **Digital Innovation:** Technology can bridge gaps in rural and urban areas, as demonstrated during the pandemic. Accessibility is critical, as are scalable platforms and empowering teachers to use tech. Prioritising inclusivity for students with special needs and developing user-friendly platforms like *Nanasa* are important.
- **Role of the British Council:** offers a three-tiered approach: policy support, network building using tested models from India and Bangladesh, and connecting stakeholders. Teacher empowerment and training are essential.
- **Skills for the Future Workforce:** Collaboration, communication, critical thinking, and creativity are essential. Exams and tuition culture discourage collaboration. Reforms should focus on equipping students with communication skills for a globalised world. The panel emphasised the urgency of preparing Gens Z and Alpha for the future, given Sri Lanka's aging population and the impact of AI on education and employability, making skills increasingly important.
- **Digital Divide:** While device access has improved, connectivity remains a challenge, as does digital literacy. Content should be adaptable with screen readers and subtitles for students with special needs. Students find online learning boring due to lack of interaction and teachers must use in-built collaboration tools to combat this. Cybersecurity and cyberbullying remain significant concerns. Subsidised devices, flexible e-content, and hybrid learning models are recommended.
- **Q&A Highlights:** The need for powerful monitoring and evaluation methods to address challenges at the rural and regional levels was emphasised. Prioritising speaking and listening in early grades, while addressing the disconnect with later grades, is critical.

### Moderator:

**Sarah Rogerson**

British Council

### panellists:

**Affan Javed**

Head of School Systems, British Council, South Asia

**Asith De Silva**

Senior Manager, Sustainability Division of Dialog Axiata PLC

**Nimali Baduraliya**

Director of Education, English and Foreign Languages Branch

**Dr. Harsha Alles**

Chairman, GATEWAY Group


**Himadari Jayasinghe**

Deputy Director of Education Exam Evaluation, North Western Province



## Lessons & Insights

- **Inclusion as a Central Theme:** The symposium defined inclusion as the practical application of diversity, encompassing language, religion, ethnicity, gender, and learning dynamics.
- **Context and Global Trends:** Sri Lanka has a valuable opportunity to align more closely with evolving global education trends, by embracing greater flexibility, adaptability and responsiveness to a rapidly changing educational landscape.
- **Key Challenges Acknowledged:** There are gaps between policy and practice at the ground level. Teacher competence varies, highlighting the need to reform teacher training curricula, especially with a focus on both subject content and social-emotional learning (SEL). Other challenges include the digital divide, ongoing teacher shortages, a disconnect between early and primary English instruction and the continued social stigma that links English proficiency to class status.
- **Multilingualism:** A focus on strengthening both national languages and English, is seen as crucial for expanding opportunities and fostering cultural understanding.
- **The Role of Technology:** Technology offers a significant opportunity to bridge educational gaps and improve learning outcomes, but it must be implemented thoughtfully, focusing on accessibility, teacher training, and avoiding the digitisation of outdated methods. *Safe Tech* practices and low-tech options are crucial to inclusivity.
- **Future-Oriented Skills:** Traditional assessment methods should be reformed to encourage skills which are essential for preparing students for the future workforce. They include: collaboration, communication, critical thinking, empathy, and creativity.
- **Shared Responsibility:** Reform must be a shared responsibility that involves the private sector, parents, and teachers, in addition to the state. Adaptability of teachers to understand the changing needs of new generations is essential.
- **Policy Level Commitment:** Policy reforms for English education are in process, with a projected implementation date of 2026. Reforms will initially focus on Grade 1 and Grade 6, entry levels to Primary and Secondary.
- **Participant Commitment** During the sharing sessions, participants expressed a commitment to contributing to education in Sri Lanka through mentoring young educators, advocating for resources, and promoting transparency.
- **Moving Forward:** In her Vote of Thanks, Anju Moses reminded everyone that the 'real work' begins in policy rooms and classrooms, with a community of people working together to improve education in Sri Lanka.
- **Listening to Learners' Voices:** The symposium emphasised the importance of listening to learners' voices and providing opportunities for them to achieve their full potential.

An abstract graphic featuring three large, overlapping organic shapes. The top shape is orange, the bottom-left shape is red, and a semi-circular shape in the middle-left is filled with dark blue diagonal stripes on a white background.

**The symposium highlighted the importance of moving towards a more inclusive and equitable education system in Sri Lanka, and addressing challenges while building on existing strengths.**

Submitted to The British Council, Sri Lanka  
Prepared by Tanya Hettiarachchi