Maldives: Country Report

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“Facing Global and Local Challenges: The New Dynamics for Higher Education”

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1. Introduction

The Maldives is an archipelago of 1,192 coral islands grouped in 26 natural atolls. The atolls vary widely in size, from a single island of a few square kilometres to large lagoons with diameters of more than 70 kilometres. The archipelago, set vertically across the equator in the middle of the Indian Ocean, stretches more than 800 kilometres from north to south and at its widest point is about 130 kilometres west to east – encompassing an area of about 90,000 square kilometers. The islands, of which only 200 are continuously inhabited, are small and low-lying where the highest point is no more than two metres above sea level. Global warming and sea level rise have consequently become major environmental concerns.

Over the past decade, real GDP growth averaged over 7% per year except for 2005, when GDP declined following the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. Maldives may be South Asia’s richest nation by GDP per capita, but 30% of children are malnourished, 40% of people live on less than $2 a day, and a growing heroin epidemic consumes the lives of many teenagers.

Post tsunami growth, while remarkable in itself, has come at the cost of extremely high budget deficits and mounting external debt. Government expenditure rose to an unprecedented 50% of GDP in 2007. Consequently, the budget deficit, which was 1.6% of GDP before the tsunami, escalated to 20% of GDP. In 2008, Government expenditure was set to rise further. Government revenue comes mainly from tourism, fishing and import tariffs. Foreign aid is also a major funding source of the budget. The government has borrowed heavily from the Central Bank and foreign sources to meet the recent deficit. Inflation has increased from 3.5% in 2006 to 5% in 2007 and to estimated double digits in 2008. IMF and other international donor agencies have urged the government to return to fiscal prudence quickly to ensure future economic stability.

In the political sphere, the country is experiencing unprecedented changes. After many years of one-candidate referenda, Maldives witnessed its first multi-party election in 2008. The election which came at the end of a five year long democratic reform process has paved way

A key priority of the new government is decentralisation. In order to increase the efficiency of public services provided to the people, and to also increase greater participation of the people in the democratic process by devolving power to them, the Government has started its decentralization project. Work is already underway to initially regionalise to seven provinces the administrative services and functions of all key ministries except Ministry of Defense and National Security and Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Providing accessibility to all islands through transportation is another key pledge of the Government. Both these programmes will create additional opportunities in expanding educational services in the atolls.

2. Overview of Higher Education System

The Maldivian Government recognizes that increasing access to tertiary education is important for improving its human resource base - ultimately the nation’s most important resource. If the basic and secondary education years provide the foundation for social development and for further learning, it is skills training and tertiary education that establish the knowledge and skills needed for economic development and competitiveness.

The rising social demand for higher education can be envisaged from the rapid increase in secondary enrolments over the past 10 years. The secondary enrolment has risen nearly threefold in the past 10 years as can be observed from Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Lower Secondary</th>
<th>Higher Secondary</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1998</td>
<td>11,845</td>
<td>436</td>
<td>12,281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>14,531</td>
<td>457</td>
<td>14,988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>18,254</td>
<td>638</td>
<td>18,892</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>28,646</td>
<td>1,942</td>
<td>30,588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>29,417</td>
<td>2,486</td>
<td>31,903</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>28,462</td>
<td>2,797</td>
<td>31,259</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Over the next three years, it is projected that over 29,000 young people will complete secondary education. A significant number of school leavers will continue to tertiary education and at least 40 to 60 percent of them will potentially enter the labour market annually. The expanding labour force demands an urgent national training needs assessment (MPND, 2007).

In the meantime in order to sustain a growing economy, an increasing number of foreign nationals have participated in the labour market registering a high annual rate of increase. The number increased from around 27,000 in 2000 to over 53,000 in 2006. Over 60,000 foreign nationals (in 2008) took up positions in both public and private sectors. Foreign nationals comprised over 30% of the total workforce in 2008.

Higher education for secondary school leavers have been largely provided in the past through scholarships funded by the Government and through overseas donors including friendly countries. Overtime such assistance has declined while the secondary school leavers have rapidly increased. Hence, more recently the government had borrowed loans from international banks (the World Bank, Asian Development Bank) to finance scholarships. With increasing numbers of students to serve and increasing debt burden, the Maldivian government has taken steps since a decade ago to commence university education in the country. In recent times privately funded overseas study (e.g. Villa Scholarship Scheme) has become an important avenue for students pursuing overseas higher education.

Today tertiary education system in the Maldives comprises of one major public institution Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE), one smaller public institution, College of Islamic Studies (CIS), and a number of private training institutions, including one that has lately attained college status.

2.1 Establishing the Maldives College of Higher Education and the College of Islamic Studies

Before 1999, a number of separate post-secondary institutions were set up to serve the vocational and technical education needs of the country. These institutions provided education and training in the areas of health, education, tourism, technology, the maritime industry, management, administration, accountancy, Islamic studies and legal studies. These institutions evolved into a disjointed system through the initiatives of a number of ministries, in relation to their respective activities and functions. The post-secondary institutions
operated for various durations ranging from 10-30 years. They have offered vocational and technical courses at certificate and diploma levels.

In 1998 these various uncoordinated institutions were amalgamated to form the Maldives College of Higher Education (MCHE), the first ever broad profile tertiary education institution. MCHE faculties include: Health Sciences, Education, Hospitality and Tourism, Management and Computing, Engineering Technology, Shari’ah and Legal Studies, Maritime Studies and Arts. The MCHE also offers programmes through open and distance mode through its Centre for Open Learning. MCHE with seven Faculties and two Centres today is governed by a College Council. The academic affairs of the College are managed by the Academic Board.

At the time of the merger, different institutions had vastly different standards and academic practices. Entry standards to academic programmes, for awards with the same name, varied among the institutions. Names of awards for programmes with more or less the same entry qualifications and durations differed. A certificate in one institution equated to a diploma in another institution. Curriculum development processes likewise vastly differed. The merger of institutions thus created the opportunity for a unified attempt at the standardisation of practices.

The former Institute of Islamic Studies was upgraded to become the College of Islamic Studies (CIS) in 2004. Compared to the MCHE, the CIS is a much smaller operation catering to the Islamic studies and Arabic medium education.

Table 2 provides gender-wise enrolment data of students in both public and private institutions. Enrolment in the public institutions over the last two years shows a steady increase. Female enrolment which was 59 percent in 2007 in public institutions has declined to about 51 percent. This may be reflective of the traditionally higher enrolment of female participants in health and education programmes and the increase in number of places available in these programmes. Presently, about 5,000 students are enrolled in MCHE and CIS's long-term courses, i.e. courses that are up to or longer than one-academic year. About 2,500 students enroll annually in short-term courses.
Table 2: Enrolment in public and private institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS</th>
<th>PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>3,968</td>
<td>2,300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>4,002</td>
<td>2,368</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>4,990</td>
<td>2,569</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: Enrolment data for private institutions reported for only 3 out of 7 institutions (Cyryx, IBS and Villa College)

MCHE in 2008 offered 6 certificate programmes, 20 advanced certificate programmes, 21 diploma programmes, 2 advanced diploma programmes, and 6 degree programmes and 4 post graduate programmes which include a master degree programme.

The CIS currently offers 5 certificate programmes, 2 advanced certificate programmes, 4 diploma programmes, 1 advanced diploma programmes, and 2 degree programmes. CIS offers its programmes to a student population of about 400 full-time candidates.

Table 3 provides a profile of the level of courses offered by MCHE, CIS and the private institutions in 2008.

Table 3: Number of Courses Offered by MCHE, CIS and Private Institutions by Level (2008)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total offered</th>
<th>Certificate</th>
<th>Advanced Certificate</th>
<th>Diploma</th>
<th>Advanced Diploma</th>
<th>Bachelor Degree</th>
<th>Post Graduate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MCHE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CIS</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Institutions</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Over the last 5 years, the number of programmes at degree level has slowly increased. In 2008, MCHE offered 6 degree programmes and (except for two) all were locally developed. Lower level courses and postgraduate courses have also increased, which reflects the changing demand for education and training.
Presently MCHE and the CIS are the only degree-granting institutions in the country. The four degree programmes offered through one private institution (Villa College) are all foreign qualifications.

The profile of programmes shows that the bulk of the programmes are at sub-degree level. As there are no separate providers of vocational training, the shorter course profile has continued to remain unchanged. A separate institution is likely to take custody of vocational training in the future.

Furthermore, the staff profile shows significant differences amongst the MCHE Faculties. Whilst some Faculties have a high proportion of graduate staff amongst their academics, the majority of staff in the other Faculties hold sub-degree level qualifications.

Table 4: Number of Fulltime Academic Staff by Qualification Level in Public HE Institutions: 2006 and 2009

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total no. of Staff</th>
<th>Less than First Degree</th>
<th>1st degree &amp; PG Diploma</th>
<th>Masters Degree</th>
<th>PhD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Totals (2006)</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals (2009)</td>
<td>146</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Table excludes part time lectures, who often reflect a similar academic profile to that of the fulltime staff. PG = post graduate.

As of 2006, only one Faculty had a staff member with a doctorate qualification. Nearly 65% of the academic staff had qualifications of either less than a first degree or a first degree and only 35% had Masterate and higher level qualifications. Currently, the situation is not dissimilar.

Participation rates in higher education among various socio-economic levels are unavailable. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that those from the outer islands are greatly disadvantaged in enrolling in tertiary education courses as they have to leave their residential islands. Living on the islands where tertiary institutions are located and travel between these and their home islands impose on them excessively high costs which most of them cannot bear.

The main difficulties in introducing higher level courses are: (1) lack of adequate number of staff with appropriate qualifications, (b) preoccupation or concern with running lower level
programmes because of the high demand and national need for them, and (c) scarcity of eligible students seeking higher qualifications. Other challenges include availability of scientific apparatus to conduct experiments and the high unit costs associated with them due to the fewer intakes.

2.2 Private higher education
There are a number of postsecondary education providers registered in the country. Until recently, many of these providers were involved in providing language courses for adults and preparing youth and adults for local professional examinations. Lately, a number of these institutions have started offering computer literacy courses which are invariably short, generally lasting two weeks to three months.

The introduction of an external quality assurance mechanism after the establishment of the Maldives Accreditation Board, has paved way for providers to offer longer term courses in keeping with the qualifications framework. Although a comprehensive institutional classificatory system is not in place, the developments in quality assurance have led to differentiation among providers. An institute or a centre registration is less elaborate than that for a college. In addition to meeting the basic guidelines of centre and/or institute registration, college registration requires submission of a detailed proposal outlining the organizational and programme structure. A panel appointed by the Department of Higher Education will assess and make recommendations accordingly. Centres and Institutes are authorised to award certificates up to Diploma level, while colleges can award undergraduate and postgraduate degrees.

Among the many private institutions registered, only a few offer long term (i.e. equal to or longer than one academic year) courses. The seven main private institutions that offer long term government approved programmes are:

- Clique Training Centre,  - Cyryx Computer Training Centre (Cyryx),
- Focus Education Centre (FEC)  - IBS
- Mandhu Learning Centre (MLC)  - Modern Academy of Professional Studies
- Villa College.          (MAPS)
In addition to the above institutions, there are more than 20 institutions that offer a variety of short courses. Most private providers are located in the capital, Male’. Some are beginning to offer selected programmes in the atolls.

Some of these institutions specialize in distinct areas. Cyryx and FEC specialise in computing related programmes. MAPS specialises in accounting while Clique specialises in management studies. MLC and Villa College have a broader profile of courses. MLC offers courses in computing, teaching, management and language. Among the private institutions Villa College offers the broadest range and profile of courses that include the following areas:

- Computing and Information Technology
- Business and Management
- Accounting and Finance
- Water Sports and Diving
- Hospitality and Tourism Studies
- Education
- Marketing

MAPS, Clique and Villa College are known for their foreign-based professional qualifications. MAPS is renowned for preparing students for professional ACCA accounting examinations while Clique prepares students for the ABE qualification. Villa College offers programmes leading to ACCA, CIMA and CIM. On the other hand MLC and Cyryx offer all locally developed courses which are approved by the MAB – the national accreditation agency. Villa College, the only private college, offer four overseas degree programmes.

3. Governance

Under the present Government’s restructuring, higher education and training, which had fallen under the purview of the Department of Higher Education and Training of the former Ministry of Higher Education, Employment and Social Security, is now under the Ministry of Education. The Ministry of Education is now responsible for both school level and tertiary education in the Maldives. Administration of overseas scholarships still remains in the newly restructured higher education ministry under the new name of Ministry of Human Resources, Youth and Sports. The newly created Department of Higher Education (DHE) in November 2008 under the Ministry of Education is the government agency now responsible for overall development of the tertiary education system in the country. The Department is expected to undertake this task through policy formulation, planning and funding, registration and licensing, and quality assurance.
The Higher Education Council, chaired by the Vice President of the country, is the supreme body for advising the Government on higher education policy. The newly reappointed Council is expected to provide oversight and overall direction to the development of in-country higher education.

In the absence of an Education or Higher Education Act, state higher education institutions have so far been established through Presidential Directives. The two state higher education institutions are governed through their respective councils. The councils comprise up to 13 to 15 eminent persons and educationalists, both elected as well as government appointed. The Council makes all major decisions for the Institutions.

The Government has declared that the two public higher education institutions, MCHE and CIS, would be brought together to form the first university in the country in 2009. A draft Maldives National University (MNU) Act has already been sent to Parliament. The establishment of MNU would pave way for a more autonomous framework for the delivery and expansion of university education in the country. It is also envisaged that this would increase greater accountability to the public.

4. Quality Assurance

Quality assurance is increasingly seen as being central to efforts made to improve higher education and the trend for international collaborations and interactions. In the case of the Maldives, the need for ensuring quality was partly influenced by a set of local factors, in addition to some located outside the country. Those factors located outside the country were linked to the supply side of higher education.

Three main steps that led the Maldives towards a formal quality assurance system can be identified. The first was the formal validation of certificates pre-empted by a major policy decision taken in April 1996 in civil service structure. On 1 April 1996, the Government decided to provide, in addition to the basic salary, a “higher education allowance” and a “technical allowance” to qualifying employees. The Higher Education Allowance was provided for those who have obtained at least an undergraduate degree. To receive the “Technical Allowance” one would have to complete at least a one-year long programme. In order to determine eligibility for these allowances, the certificates, diplomas and degrees would have to be obtained from an institution that is acceptable to the Government.
The second major step that moved events towards establishment of quality standards and accreditation came about with the creation of the MCHE in 1998. An Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan project, to develop the MCHE and which became effective soon after the College was formed, stipulated through a loan covenant that a Postsecondary Accreditation Board be formed. Hence, a formal regulatory set up was mandatory.

The third major step was the formation of three professional councils in 1999 for the first time. They were the Maldives Nursing Council, the Maldives Medical Council and the Health Sciences Board. The purpose of these councils was to set standards of professional practice in the respective areas. Nurses who want to practice in the Maldives, both local and foreign, and medical doctors would have to be registered with their respective council.

These developments led policy decision towards standardisation and raising of quality of educational provision in the country. It was also a move to standardise the standard of practice in the Maldives with international standards in the respective professions.

In order to get public acceptance of longer courses offered by these institutions, a government-guaranteed quality assurance mechanism was essential. The Maldives Accreditation Board was thus established in 2000 under the Ministry of Education, with the following objectives.

1. To develop a national qualifications framework.
2. To determine the standards of courses within the national framework; to monitor that teaching is carried out to that standard; and to monitor whether standards of courses, for which certificates are awarded, are maintained.
3. Register all courses and certificates awarded by public and private providers.
4. To assess the standards of certificates obtained from overseas institutions (MAB, 2001a).

The overall intention of the Government in setting up the MAB can be summed up as being (i) to ensure quality in local higher education, (2) to guarantee recognition of local awards in an international labour market and (3) to facilitate the articulation of awards, given within the Maldives, into educational programmes in prestigious universities worldwide. The introduction of the Maldives National Qualification Authority (MNQF) in 2001 was a major milestone in quality assurance development in the Maldives. The main objective of the MNQF was “to provide learners, employers and education providers with qualifications that are nationally standardized and quality assured” (MAB, 2001a, p.1).
The MNQF was also expected to provide a comprehensive and coherent national framework, which facilitated quality improvement, quality assurance and private sector participation in post-secondary education. (MAB, nd). Due to greater academic nature of the qualifications framework, it is currently under review to facilitate better articulation between the traditional higher education and the vocational/technical training.

The MAB has to be positioned to play a stronger monitoring role across the whole spectrum of postsecondary and technical and vocational education. This can be achieved through capacity building and strengthening its links with the industry, the education service providers and the accreditation authorities worldwide.

Transforming the MAB into an independent Quality Assurance Agency is a priority. Such an agency’s main functions could be: (1) Develop Code of Practice or Quality Assurance Framework for HE to guide all who work in tertiary education; (2) Conducting external assurance, both institutional and programmatic (accreditation of programs and institution, assessment of the teaching and learning process and maintenance of standards); and (3) Enforcing internal assurance (self-assessment, benchmarking) by institutions.

Furthermore, bringing tertiary education provision in line with international standard and quality are key objectives. In this regards the following strategies will be pursued.

(a) Set quality criteria and standards
(b) Review the mechanism for accreditation which seeks to address quality issues consistent with international practice
(c) Promote quality initiatives with the objective of enhancing quality in the design and delivery of programmes
(d) Implement the Recognition and Equivalence System of qualifications at post-secondary level
(e) Require institutions to develop guidelines for promoting good practice and innovation in teaching and research.

### The MNQF Features

9 levels of qualifications


All qualifications in the MNQF have a purpose and are interrelated to each other. Provides for articulation from one qualification to the other by recognizing prior learning.

MNQF provides pathways for lifelong learning.

Recommends minimum credit hours and credit points for each qualification. The length of time it would normally take to complete a course leading to each qualification is expressed in weeks and academic years.

Source: MAB, 2001a
5. Emerging Issues and Challenges

5.1 Access
The economic growth and social wellbeing of every nation around the world, including our own, in today’s global and knowledge-based economy, depend on a well-educated workforce and very affordable access to higher education. Strengthening and expansion of higher education and training is central to achieving the national development objectives. Human development and utilisation of the human resource potential of the nation through wider employment opportunities are essential constituents of any national development effort. With the advancement of the education system, demand for tertiary education and training is expected to dramatically increase over next five to ten years. This unprecedented demand is fuelled by complementary forces of rapid expansion of secondary education coupled with escalating skill requirements by the industry and job market.

Policy direction and substantive support are essential to facilitate and energise the public and private providers of education services in meeting the need for higher education and training while ensuring that the knowledge, attitudes and skills imparted through these avenues are in line with the requirements of the market and the national development priorities.

Considerable efforts are needed to increase higher education and training opportunities in accordance with the escalating demand and national human development needs. At present, access to higher education opportunities is improbable to the great majority of the population primarily due to the limited presence and capacity of higher education service providers within the country as well as the high cost of pursuing higher education abroad.

Official participation rates in higher education are unavailable in the Maldives. However, for the purpose of illustration an estimate can be arrived at using the 2007 secondary enrolment. It is reasonable to estimate that from the destination of those sitting for ‘O’ levels in 2007, Government employment absorbed 12%, the Advance Level classes enrolled a further 15%, approximately 15% would be accepted into the various post-secondary institutions or ventured abroad for further study. With the remaining 58% either not in employment or obtaining employment in the private sector, A strong need exists for regular tracer studies to be conducted to provide a more detailed picture to assist sector planning and policy development of the destinations of youth as they move through or exit at various levels of the secondary system of education.
The number of grade 12 students seeking entry into one of the in-country tertiary education programmes is increasing. This is expected to increase with the projected growth of the grade 12 cohort. This in turn is likely to generate further pressure on the ability of grade 10 students gaining access into the sector. However, these are not simply demand considerations: the overall response of the tertiary education sector will depend on conscious supply or policy deliberation with respect to student entry levels and the level of education and training to be provided.

Meeting the bourgeoning demand for higher education equitably in a widely dispersed geographical setting is going to be challenging. It is a challenge that the government alone cannot meet. Hence, creative ways in expanding access and providing more equitable opportunities especially for those in the atolls need to be considered. A five-year strategic plan for the development of higher education is being developed currently. Some strategies that the government will consider are:

(a) Increase tertiary Enrolment Rate from estimated under 20% to over 30% by 2013.

(b) MCHE (future National University) will open up campuses in all the 7 provinces. (Currently there are campuses in only three provinces).

(c) Opening up higher education opportunities for local as well as foreign public-private partnership.

(d) Promote and facilitate strategic alliances between local and overseas institutions.

(e) Encourage local private institutions through incentives to set up campuses or branches in the atolls in the not too distant future.

(f) Each of the 20 atolls has a well-built and well equipped Teacher Resource Centre. Contracting out selected TRCs in the atolls to conduct tertiary education courses can definitely give much easier access to those living in the atolls.

(g) Develop equity mechanisms (such as scholarships, student loans, accommodation and travel stipend) for expanding and widening access and opportunities for disadvantaged groups.

(h) Each student can be offered through an appropriate agency, for example National Social Protection Agency.

(i) Expand the provision of Open and Distance Learning (ODL) course to increase access to postsecondary education and lifelong learning. Actively pursue and continue to be part of the Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth (VUSSC) project.
(j) Continue to be an active member in the setting up of the South Asian University.

(k) Create an enabling environment for Maldives to emerge as a future South Asia Knowledge Hub and a Centre for Higher Learning and Excellence by:

- Creating and developing Centres of Excellence in specified discipline areas. (E.g. marine science, environmental research),
- Establishing selected overseas universities of repute in selected provinces, and
- Facilitating the granting of student visas to encourage foreign students studying in Maldives.

5.2 Financing of higher education

The funding and resourcing structure for higher education and training in the Maldives appears to be complex and not so straightforward. While a number of the formal public programmes (i.e. health, education, engineering technology, tourism studies) are almost entirely funded by the government, there are some programmes (i.e. management, information technology, accounting and maritime studies) that have continued to recover a comparatively higher proportion of the recurrent costs by way of tuition fees. For those programmes where no fee is charged both the capital component as well as the recurrent operating expenditure are borne by the government. Minor amounts of revenue are raised from some fees charged (mainly to employers) for special courses, but this is a relatively insignificant source of funding input at this stage.

Employers generally finance their own in-house training requirements. Students do not pay fees to attend some programmes in the public sector. On the contrary, they are given a monthly stipend. The two public institutions until this year have gone through an elaborate process of developing a detailed consolidated budget. This budget scrutinised by the Ministry of Finance and Treasury, and if necessary by a Cabinet Committee, is finally approved by the Parliament. Starting from this year the Government has commenced the new Public Accounts System under which government entities are funded through single line-item entries in the national budget. Specifically, it aims to simplify the national budget by providing a single line item per institution in the budget rather than a detailed breakdown by accounting codes for each institution.

The increased number of secondary school graduates as a consequence of the universalization of primary education will also create strong pressure for expansion of the higher education. With the growing secondary school leavers and the ever expanding demand for higher
educating this sub sector poses real challenges to any developing country. The higher education sector will have to be financed while increasing the financial outlay for sustaining the improvement of quality of a universalised primary education system and an expanding secondary education system.

While securing funds have not been easy, private providers have been investing in the sector; understandably to varying degrees. One of the leading investors in the sector has been Villa Foundation, charitable trust owned by a leading local businessman. This foundation administers a Scholarship Scheme and a Donation Scheme aimed at providing opportunities for further education and skills training to eligible merit candidates but are unable to take that further step due to financial and other constraints. The Villa Scholarship Scheme provides opportunity for Maldivians to pursue First Degree, Masters Degree, PhD, and specialist training programmes, in country as well overseas, in various fields ranging from mass communication to PADI Masters programs (Villa Foundation, 2009).

Within the overall policy goal of lessening the burden of the cost of higher education for the student and parents, the government will consider either reducing or altogether waiving tuition fees from public tertiary education courses identified as nationally important. In future fees will be charged for all degree programmes. Some degree programmes charge fees even now. A fee policy is currently under debate at the Higher Education Council.

Higher education strategic plan currently under development will explore the following strategies in order to address the financing of the sub sector.

(a) Expansion of the student loan scheme for in-country HE students as well as for overseas scholarships.
(b) Provide costs of all institutions of higher education on the basis of student enrolment.
(c) Commitment to diversification of sources of funding for both public and private higher education institutions. Opening the sector for public – private partnership.
(d) The National University, once established, can generate revenue through the provision of technical assistance, consulting services, and educational training programs to users and the community.
(e) Ensure greater accountability of institutions of higher education through monitoring and audit and ensuring efficient resource management system.

5.3 Internationalisation

The two public higher education institutions have pursued range of international linkages in the last eight years. Four of the seven MCHE Faculties were engaged in transnational quality
assessment activities from various institutions in different countries. They include activities such as teaching set curricula and conducting overseas examinations (e.g. Association of Accounting Technician (AAT) and Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) based in the UK); conducting Business and Technician Education Council (BTEC) approved courses in association with a College of Birmingham University; and course development and delivery, in collaboration with universities (e.g. degree programmes linked to Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand). In addition, one centre (Centre for Maritime Studies) is required to obtain prior approval of courses from the maritime administration of the Maldives (Ministry of Housing, Transport and Environment). These courses are prepared in accordance with International Maritime Organisation (IMO) model courses and they are approved on that basis. These programmes, in addition to overseas quality assurance obligations, are also simultaneously required to meet the national accreditation requirements.

Institutional linkages of the CIS are mainly to Al Azhar University in Cairo. Each linkage required a separate type of institutional arrangement for quality assurance. All the links were established to achieve and maintain quality assurance for specific courses. Whilst some programmes required an annual visit from the overseas institution, there were programmes that did not require any such visits.

Many of the private providers also seek overseas recognition through various arrangements. The Three main types of transnational quality assurance engaged by the providers in Maldives are: (a) keeping an internationally recognised standard; (b) external verification; and (c) maintaining quality standards determined by international organisations.

5.4 Development of the private sector

Although supporting the private sector in higher education has remained a policy for a number of years, no concrete steps have so far been taken to address this. No action plan or framework has been developed to address the issues and concerns confronting private higher education. If the sector were to provide quality education vital to the country’s development, the necessity to define specific means of support and encouragement of private education, particularly in the area of land and finance, appear to be crucial.

As a concrete manifestation of Government’s support for private higher education, a policy will be developed this year to address the most critical concerns. Specific means of encouragement and support would include:
(a) Constructing a private higher education learning centre to facilitate long term lease of classroom space at a reduced rate.

(b) Consider recommending to the Government the exempt of private higher education providers from business tax, income tax, land-use tax and customs duties for the importation of necessary instructional materials.

(c) Facilitate aid from donors to private providers.

5.5 System diversification and differentiation

Undoubtedly, the growth of enrolments and the steady increase of number of institutions is expected to foster greater heterogeneity in variety of ways. These include heterogeneity in the kinds of institutions, in the degrees and programs offered, in the modes of entry and exit, etc. Diversification in the public sector is achieved through the opening up of new Faculties and new programmes in the two public institutions. The creation of the Faculty of Arts in MCHE and the recent launching of a programme in journalism attest to the diversification attempts. In the public sector diversification is also achieved in expanding operations to new campuses. New distance education programmes are also underway to be launched through the Centre for Open Learning of MCHE. This would cater high education programmes to a broader audience especially in remote islands.

Diversification is also partly achieved with the growing number of private providers. Some private providers tend to specialize in certain disciplines such as accounting or management. Others, with larger investments, tend to offer a range of programmes.

Stimulated by the plans to establish the national university, which in the long run is expected to focus on higher degrees, the need for a polytechnic to focus on the technical vocational education and training, has become a priority. Such an institutional differentiation can facilitate the re-focusing on the core business of university education and much needed employment related skills training separately.

Specific strategies being considered are:

(a) Establishment of a polytechnic

(b) Facilitating part-time study options
7. Other thrusts in reforming higher education

The following areas are identified as future thrust areas in reforming and further developing the higher education sector in the Maldives.

(a) Recruitment of qualified students and supporting their retention, especially first-year students
(b) Recruitment and retention of qualified staff
(c) Improving the quality of education through an expanded training and retraining of teachers programme
(d) Provision of higher education in a decentralised provincial administration system
(e) Strengthening research capability
(f) Quality assurance, accreditation and recognition of qualifications
(g) Developing science related higher education (e.g. establishment of a science faculty)
(h) Maximising the scope of ICT in higher education delivery and management.

8. Conclusion

Maldives is a small developing country severely affected by the 2004 tsunami. Having successfully and peacefully changed over to a new democratic government in 2008 through its first multi-party election, the public expectation for delivery of all services, including educational services, is extremely high. Higher education of Maldives cannot stand outside the nation’s economic development and re-construction. For a higher education system of good repute and quality, serving economic and social needs for the nation’s development, it is required to continue the sector renovation, to build more dynamic and diversified system, to expand its scope and increase competitiveness.

The first university is expected to be established soon. However, the country faces unprecedented challenges to expand the higher education sector during economically difficult times. In this regard, the Government actively pursues public-private partnership in higher education. Strengthening external quality assurance mechanisms and ensuring internal quality management systems are essential to bring about the desired growth, diversification, and quality in our higher education.
References consulted in preparing the report


