

The Impact of Nine-Year Schooling on Higher Learning in Mauritius

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Abstract

Nine-Year Schooling is the new educational concept developed in Mauritius by the Ministry of Education and Human Resources with the perspective of favouring holistic learning aimed at the future of the Mauritian workforce. With its main intention of being a strategy that aligns Mauritius with international learning standards, this concept should be an effective one although its outcomes have not yet been developed. It is expected that higher learning might be affected by the inputs of the Nine-Year Schooling namely in terms of competences and skills that are likely to be developed by learners in the new system. This research work analyses how Nine-Year Schooling will impact higher education in terms of pre-requisites developed by existing learners, the new paradigm of secondary school education and the new challenges of tertiary education. It also analyses the challenges that the Nine-Year Schooling might pose to higher education. Assuming that outcomes are not yet available, the research seeks expert advice from various stakeholders and a panel of expert opinion to see how the Nine-Year Schooling posits itself in the future and how universities will have to embrace such a new concept.

Keywords: Nine-Year Schooling, impact, higher education, prospects

Introduction

The Republic of Mauritius, situated in the South-West of the Indian Ocean, is actually undergoing a major change regarding its educational system, particularly at the primary and the secondary levels. Primary education starts from six years and extends up to eleven years while secondary education is undertaken for the next seven years. As at last year, primary education was achieved through the completion of the Certificate of Primary Education examination (CPE), a competitive examination which allowed the best students gain the most highly-rated secondary educational institutions of the country like the Royal College Port Louis (RCPL), the

Royal College Curepipe (RCC), the Queen Elizabeth College (QEC) and a shortlist of secondary schools listed as national colleges.

The CPE Examinations were developed in 1980 in Mauritius. Earlier, primary level examinations were set by Moray House, London with a final examination leading to the Junior Scholarship. The CPE Examinations have been very competitive since students needed to do a lot of rote learning prior to achieving success. The CPE is a high-stake and mandatory examination that certifies completion of primary education (Unesco, 2015). To gain chances for a national college, students took private tuition to improve their chances for success in the examinations. Owing to its high competitive nature, the CPE was subject to criticism from various stakeholders namely the public, scholars, journalists, educationists, etc. who criticised the inhumane nature of such examinations. The intense competition to secure a place in the star schools—referred to as the rat race—begins right from lower primary years, thus exerting immense psychological pressure on both students and their parents and perverting the very function of the school within the society (ADEA, 2011).

There were lots of debate on the primary education issue when the newly-elected government in 2014 came forward with a strategy to repeal the CPE that stayed to test for almost 35 years and have it replaced by Nine-Year Schooling.

The Nine-Year Schooling Concept

The Nine-Year Schooling concept is an innovative learning strategy for Mauritius where it englobes both primary and secondary education up to fifteen years of age. The reform project is in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goal 4 on Education which is to ‘ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all’ (Draft Policy, 2015). The innovation here is that it blends both primary and secondary education. The pressure of a final primary level examination is relieved because students will have to sit for a new primary level examination which is not competitive for college seats. Article 65 from the Government programme stated that Government will introduce a nine-year basic continuous schooling and the Certificate of Primary Education will be replaced by an end-of-primary cycle assessment (Government Programme, 2015). The new examination known as the Primary School Achievement Certificate (PSAC) is a pathway for secondary level education which extends from Grade 7 to Grade 9 where students will sit for a national examination. From that stage, they will have access to academies specialised per subject area and that will allow them complete their two secondary level examinations offered by the University of Cambridge, namely the School Certificate and the Higher School Certificate.

There have been a lot of debate on the validity of the Nine-Year Schooling but, from a global point of view, all stakeholders concerned believe that this new learning strategy augurs a new stepping stone to learning with holistic education now available to students (Dookun, 2015). In contrast to previous learning methodologies, the Nine-Year Schooling will enable children to better develop their learning through creativity, research, reflection and compel them to benefit from learning in a more vocational than academic manner. The Nine-Year Continuous Basic Education Reform programme sits within the Education and Human Resource Strategy Plan 2008 – 2020, which translates Government's commitment to bring about fundamental reforms in education (Commonwealth.org, 2017).

From this standpoint, it is quite clear that Nine-Year Schooling represents an advantage for Mauritius which might henceforth align its education to international standards. With children gaining broad-based education up to Grade 9 and entering academies for course specialization as from grades 11 to 13, there is the possibility of furthering cut-throat competition at a higher stage bearing in mind that as the child matures, he is more apt to consider competing and achieving success compared to the innocence and naivety of a ten or eleven-year old child.

Problem Statement

Since the Nine-Year Schooling has been vaunted as a modern strategy promoting holistic learning and developing in a more pronounced way the aptitudes of children, the main question arising could be whether this impacts education of the child up to higher grades and at the tertiary education level. So far, the plan has been scaled up to fifteen years of age and nothing has been evaluated beyond that. In a sense, the benefits of the Nine-Year Schooling might be estimated to lower secondary level only—less than 16 years. Nothing has been so far evaluated on the longer-term learning experience of the child. For instance, Mangar (2015) states that the reform suggests a modular system but what appears is a subject approach. Currently primary education is moving towards a transdisciplinary approach but in Mauritius there will be a strict division into ‘Core’ and ‘Non-Core’ subjects—a compartmentalised approach instead of facilitating valuable connections between subjects (Mangar, 2015).

In this respect, it might look appropriate to say that the Nine-Year Schooling promotes learning up to 16 years—the age when an individual cannot be declared illiterate after studying for 10 years continuously. Henceforth, there is no clear thought on how this promotes students’ learning in the final years of secondary schooling which are sanctioned by Cambridge examinations.

For the research purpose, the evaluation goes still further by asking about the impact of the new educational strategy on higher education. Could it be generally believed that the Nine-Year Schooling would bring about better educated students that will enter universities in the future. Given that the Nine-Year Schooling is applicable as from 2017, the real outcomes for universities could be envisaged as from 2024/2025 while the initial evaluation is applicable as from 2021. To this end, the time scale is quite long and it might be really complex to assess how this will impact the future.

Tertiary Education in the limelight

Tertiary education is another key focus of the Mauritian government. Understanding the need to develop a high-income country by 2030 with infrastructure comparable to Western standards, Government of Mauritius has emphasised the importance of higher learning. The earlier government proposed the concept ‘One graduate per family’ with the intention of increasing graduate intake in Mauritius with a view to developing high calibre employees for the future. Former Minister, Jeetah supported that ‘if each family can have at least one graduate within their midst, we are convinced that this can be a powerful tool in their hands to combat poverty and to aspire for greater upward social mobility than would otherwise be the case. (Gouges, 2011)’ Tertiary education is now quite well served in the national through four public universities and a hundred private educational institutions that offer varied programmes ranging from Certificate courses to undergraduate programmes. Some even offer Master level and Doctoral courses in collaboration with foreign universities.

From a researcher’s point of view, a few research questions might arise. This stems from the idea that the Nine-Year Schooling appears like a panacea to the present educational system at the primary education level characterised by a failure rate of some 25%. Evidently, by reducing the burden of competition as from 12 years of age, it is likely that a greater percentage of students is likelier to enter post-secondary education with the potential of being already subject specialised as from 15 years of age.

Research Questions

From the above arguments, research questions arise. They are as follows:

- Does the Nine-Year Schooling concept have a direct impact on higher education?
- Is there a possibility of having the critical mass of students for higher learning?
- Does the Nine-Year Schooling adequately prepare students enter universities or higher education learning?

-What are the strategies that higher education institutions should develop to accommodate the Nine-Year Schooling strategy?

The Research Premise

The open nature of the study reveals that it might be appropriate to use both secondary and primary source of information to analyse the data. For instance, a questionnaire method used might not be sufficient because of the longer term impact of Nine-Year Schooling on higher education. Secondly, outcomes obtained in a shorter timeframe, say 3 to 5 years, might not accurately illustrate the impact of such a strategy because everything that will emanate in the next five years could not alluded to the Nine-Year Schooling. It is worth noting here that higher education is an important variable because one needs to assess the longer term benefit of the concept as it would be of no means important if the impact were limited only to primary or secondary level students.

Research Methodology

For the purposes of the research, the methodology is developed in the following way. Firstly, opinions of stakeholders are synthesised to see the pros and cons of Nine-Year Schooling. The names of the people concerned are not explicitly exposed due to confidentiality reasons but the occupations and organisations where they work will be depicted.

The main research was based on a panel of expert opinions provided by respondents who are closer to the frame of tertiary education namely university lecturers, students, university dean and any stakeholder having an interest on tertiary education.

The research technique would be essentially qualitative given that data assessments might give an evaluative statement not value judgment that one wants to have from a long-term oriented framework analysing the impact of Nine-Year Schooling on higher education. The main research questions will be asked to solicit arguments to support the hypothesis that Nine-Year Schooling might positively impact higher education in the future but also identify potential challenges therein.

Research Findings

Secondary Data: General Insights into Nine-Year Schooling

The first part of the research question seeks the input of different stakeholders on Nine-Year Schooling. Information was sourced from publications like newspapers and the Internet to provide an initial outlook of how the Mauritian public generally views the concept. A selective technique is used to quote only words that have particular meaning and value regarding

the concept. As a research practice, secondary data was first assessed and synthesised prior to discussing the research with greater depth.

The following are comments made by major stakeholders or opinion leaders on Nine-Year Schooling. They are reproduced through translation from L'express newspaper (2015).

Leela Devi Dookhun, actual Minister of Education and Human Resources (2014-todate)

'It will be a new learning way with freshly trained educators. Structurally, the nine years of continuous basic education means pupils will stay for six years in primary schools before they move on to regional secondary schools where they will complete the remaining three years of Nine-Year Schooling cycle. Subsequently, they will continue their schooling for the remaining years either in the same regional school or an academy. The aim of the reform is to provide fair learning opportunities to all children with none being left behind.'(Defimedia, 2016)

Steeve Obeegadoo, Former Minister of Education (2001-2005):

'If the Nine-Year Schooling plan is promoted, it will mean a big step taken. Any reform eliminating the CPE should be claimed as positive. This reform looks to be a critical one as numerous arguments arise. Planning should have been initiated much earlier and if Mauritius does not promote this strategy, this will be a return to the past without any meaningful progress.'

Kadress Pillay, Former Minister of Education (1995-1999):

'A positive point here is that cut-throat education disappears. I earlier claimed the need to have mentors and coaches to support adolescents in their growth phase. There appears to be good political will here.'

Ally Yearoo, Education Officers Union:

'We are in favour of the reform as the level of failure is quite high at CPE level. However, there will be pressure on students to score better grades like moving from Grade 6 to 7. There will be again competition at Grade 10 where children enter puberty. A similar formula has not been successful in the past.'

Vinod Seegum, President of the Government Teachers' Union:

'Children facing learning difficulties will be supervised by specialised teachers. This should have been undergone earlier and we are satisfied with the Minister's decision.'

Bureau de l'Education Catholique (BEC) :

'The BEC appreciates a broader curriculum with core and non-core subjects, the introduction of continuous assessments and flexibility linked with the different learning stages of the children, especially those needed more time to benefit from desirable learning competences.'

Primary data: Arguments and Findings

Once the arguments of Nine-Year Schooling were identified, the next step was to find out responses from the research sample and assess their understanding of the impact of the new strategy on higher education. This comprised primary input to the research.

Argument One: The direct impact of Nine-Year Schooling concept on higher education.

The first question referred to the direct impact of Nine-Year Schooling on higher education. The argument was to find out whether the new concept had some viability provided that it was long-term geared.

Respondents:

L.K, Educator, Secondary

‘Apparently, Nine-Year Schooling seems to be focused on primary and secondary education. Its far-reaching impact cannot be effectively assessed because the concept is just new. Since its being in infancy up to now, little has been said onto how it will impact the future.’

S.R, Université des Mascareignes Student :

‘I think that Nine-Year Schooling is likely to bring a larger number of students to universities because the pass rate is likely to be higher under the new system. Also, this is in line with the Government policy of ‘one graduate per family’.

B.N, Université des Mascareignes Dean of Faculty:

‘The intention of Nine-Year Schooling rests upon improving primary and secondary education focused on holistic learning. It is clear that this is likely to positively impact tertiary students with more students willing to follow higher education. Evidently, courses must be geared so that they are in line with Nine-Year Schooling philosophy.’

S.P, Open University of Mauritius:

‘It is difficult to have an initial appreciation of the impact of Nine-Year Schooling at the tertiary level. However, impacts at the secondary level are likely to bring meaningful information as to how higher education will have to react to it.’

Argument Two: Having the critical mass of students for higher learning

This question analysed the need for having a critical mass of students for higher learning based from the fact that the educational reform would bring higher pass rates to allow students enter tertiary education.

Respondents:

L.K, Educator, Secondary

‘Nine-Year Schooling will definitely bring a larger number of students to tertiary education but I argue that there will be both diversity and quality if students enter academies that will allow them become specialists in subject areas.’

S.R, Université des Mascareignes Student :

‘Seen from the perspective that more students will pass both in terms of quality and quantity, there will be a greater number of students joining higher education. This might be a ‘must’ for them in the future.’

B.N, Université des Mascareignes Dean of Faculty:

‘The issue of critical mass has always been a major concern for Mauritius since its stepping to industrialisation. Hopefully, the numbers will rise and so be, the critical mass. There should be good correlation between what has been created under the Nine-Year Schooling and how competences fit into higher education needs.’

S.P, Open University of Mauritius:

‘If the Open University already attracts large number of flexible and distance-learning students, it would be commendable to find out a sufficient number of students joining tertiary education.’

Argument Three: The adequacy of Nine-Year Schooling adequately in preparing students enter universities or higher education learning.

The third argument converged the idea of how adequate Nine-Year Schooling needed to be to prepare students enter higher educational learning. A few secondary school teachers were contacted for this question.

Respondents:

L.K, Educator, State Secondary

‘Nine-Year Schooling will prepare students embrace various specialisations according to their needs. However, they will still be confronted to Cambridge examinations that are highly academic.’

T.V.M, Educator, Private Secondary:

‘The idea looks glamorous but there is no immediate forecast regarding the stance of private secondary schools as per how adequate Nine-Year Schooling would be in preparing students for universities. Could be a more realistic argument were the adequacy for immediate employment after college.’

R.B, Rector, State Secondary:

‘One might not always know the stuff that Nine-Year Schooling might have but it is an obligation for a student to be adequately prepared

prior to joining a university or higher educational institution. Possibly, citizenship education must not be overlooked.’

B.N, Université des Mascareignes Dean of Faculty:

‘The adequacy remains a tough question. Universities are so far limited to attracting candidates on entry requirements—some being flexible and other being quite strict. The main argument here might be the scope of subjects studied prior to joining a course. Definitely, courses should be innovative in the future.’

Argument Four: The strategies that higher education institutions should develop to accommodate the Nine-Year Schooling strategy.

The last research argument aimed to find out whether higher educational institutions were bound to develop strategies to accommodate Nine-Year Schooling. This was quite a tough question where insights were obtained from educators and students alike.

M.L, Senior Lecturer, Public University:

‘Universities are on the move and rely on changes taking place from both internal and external environments. Definitely, insights from Nine-Year Schooling might enforce universities to develop learning methodologies that involve creativity, innovation and broad-based learning.’

B.N, Université des Mascareignes Dean of Faculty:

‘Universities have both a traditional role to play on being purveyors of tertiary education and an innovator of learning strategies. Personally, they might also be embarked on this concept but Nine-Year Schooling will compel universities to develop a more student-based learning approach focused on sharing ideas and having more practical impact on society.’

S.R, Université des Mascareignes Student:

‘I would like to really see how universities will develop curricula in line with Nine-Year Schooling. The barrier is that after students have accomplished this, they will move directly to Cambridge examinations. It is at this stage that the exams need to be reviewed so that they become more practical for students who will find out a better pathway to entering the university.’

T.V.M, Educator, Private Secondary:

‘Learning strategies must be innovative like using technologies to enhance learning, ‘thinking out of the box’ learning activity, ideas sharing, case studies, industrial placements, etc. Yet, I think that university learning should be reinvented but this is the way that some universities are practicing while caring for what educational reforms are already addressing.’

Discussion

Four general issues have arisen from the findings of the panel of expert opinion on the impact that the Nine-Year Schooling is likely to have

on higher learning in Mauritius. Firstly, the direct impact of Nine-Year Schooling on tertiary education might not effectively assessed now although it could be broadly said that it could be relevant in the future. So far, Nine-Year Schooling has been focused on primary and secondary level education and not on tertiary level. The long-term benefit, the holistic perception and the need to have more graduates partly responds to this argument. Rughooputh (2011) supports the idea that the new system proposed, based on a more widened access, provides new opportunities for major resource optimisation, enhancing the quality of education, specialisation teachers/schools, justified construction of schools, and reintroduction of a new type of competition commensurate with the requirements of global competition.

Next comes the issue of having a critical mass of students for higher learning although the figure is just rising steadily now. Respondents stated that there might be greater diversity and quality of students' intake at university level, the need to have sufficient students to match the market needs and the opportunities that universities could create from flexible modes of study to draw larger number of students. However, according to NEFA Review Report (2015), hurdles do exist. Overcoming social inequalities and improving the Gini coefficient that has regressed from 0.371 in 2001/ 02 to 0.413 in 2012 undoubtedly has several implications, not least for the education and training sector. Indeed, one key challenge to developing a sustainable and vibrant economy that relies on increased labour productivity is sustaining the momentum for a continuous upgrading of knowledge and high level skills in a lifelong learning education has been the cardinal driver of change and the vector for innovation and participation in the 'global knowledge economy' (NEFA, 2015).

Thirdly, the adequacy of Nine-Year Schooling was considered with regards to preparing students entering universities. So far, the final secondary examinations like the Cambridge School Certificate and Higher School Certificate stand as the key inputs to tertiary education. In this context, university entry requirements will influence the intake of the students and the need for citizenship education will be essential as well though this is overlooked at college level. The latter point is supported by the government's aim is to offer a comprehensive basic education cycle that provides students with the foundational skills for success in all further learning leading to an empowered 2030 citizenry. The objectives inculcate in young people a sense of moral responsibility, patriotism and set of values (Newsfeed, 2016).

Finally, in line with the long-term adjustments needed by tertiary institutions to accommodate the Nine-Year Schooling generation, no big development has yet been initiated. Presently, universities are influenced by

the diktats of employers and the external educational environment. The need to develop curricula has been emphasised here including the importance of developing new curricula and learning methodologies. Universities might have to adjust to changing needs of students but such 'fine tuning' is imaginable since universities have learnt to 'think out of the box'. Osman and Burman (2016) state that higher education sector faces a number of growingly complex challenges as a result of its expansion over the years. This includes the necessity for the sector to: develop high value added knowledge to enhance its competitive advantage; build its capacity to operate in an internationalised higher education environment; as well as widening access, ensuring equity and improving quality both of service and delivery (Osman and Burman, 2016)

Research Limitations/Delimitations

This research work is based on qualitative data assessment and has no quantitative analysis since the researcher is of the opinion that statistics might only give an interpretation of what respondents actually think of. Such a technique might not provide an in-depth evaluation of a future situation. There are limitations however like the scale and scope of the research which is undertaken in a short time frame with a panel of expert opinion. The assumptions cannot be generalised at the present time though they have some insightful information to provide. On the whole, the findings are reflections on a chosen topic but do not necessarily fully expose the issue of Nine-Year Schooling on the future of education in Mauritius.

Conclusion

It can be synthesised from this research that there is a serious argument regarding the impact of a new educational strategy like the Nine-Year Schooling on higher learning in Mauritius especially at the tertiary level. So far, the concept has been vulgarised in the country as being some sort of panacea to the problem posed since long by the constraining CPE primary level examinations. To overcome competition at the tender age of 11, the educational reform aims at providing a holistic approach to primary education while it also blends part of secondary education. There is a gap however at the tertiary level because, so far, such a type of education has been inspired from demands of industry, education specialists and the international environment. This research posits that tertiary education will be dependent on the input of the Nine-Year Schooling since this concept is in line with international standards and it is expected to leverage primary level education in Mauritius. Incidentally, it is believed that there should be impact on tertiary education. In Singapore, for example there has been a commitment to trimming syllabi at the primary and secondary levels, without

compromising students' preparation for higher education (Knight and Rapley, 2007). Additionally, Cheselek and Magavalia (2012) state that a suitable educational vision places great emphasis on the link between education and the labour market; the need to create entrepreneurial skills and competences. This has been so far discussed in terms of findings from a panel of expert opinion that states, inter alia, the need to improve tertiary education by having more qualified candidates, the possibility of gaining a critical mass of students needed at the tertiary level, the adequacy that is required from the new educational strategy in terms of competences expected, and finally, the need for tertiary institutions to adapt themselves suitably in line with what the Nine-Year Schooling might propose in terms of capacity for the tertiary education sector.

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