

# Thirteen Years Guaranteed Education: Interest of Plantation Sector Students' on Vocational Education (A Study Based on Tamil Medium School in the Kegalle Educational Zone)

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## ABSTRACT

The introduction of the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program in 2017 marked a significant turning point in the development of vocational education in Sri Lanka. This initiative was designed to ensure that all students remain within the school system for 13 years, regardless of their performance at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level (O/L) examination. A key objective of the program is to provide vocational training opportunities, particularly at NVQ Level 4, for students who do not qualify for the traditional Advanced Level (A/L) academic stream, thereby reducing school dropout rates and improving employability. This study focuses on the level of interest in vocational education among plantation sector students, specifically within Tamil medium schools in the Kegalle Educational Zone. Despite the availability of this program, student participation remains low in this sector. The research aims to identify students' interest levels, examine the challenges they face, and assess the awareness of the program among students, parents, and teachers. A mixed-method research design was employed, utilizing questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions for primary data collection, alongside secondary data sources such as official documents. Data were analyzed using SPSS and Excel, incorporating both quantitative (correlation analysis) and qualitative approaches. The findings reveal limited awareness of the program, low student participation, insufficient resources, challenges in teaching and learning processes, limited availability of practical subjects, inadequate institutional support, and lack of parental encouragement. The study recommends enhancing awareness, improving facilities, ensuring proper supervision, and expanding program availability to increase its effectiveness and accessibility.

**Keywords:** Vocational Education, 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program, Plantation Sector Students, Student Participation, Educational Awareness

## INTRODUCTION

The concept of "Education for All," emphasized in global declarations such as the Jomtien World Conference, highlights education as a fundamental right and a key driver of sustainable national development. In Sri Lanka, compulsory education policies were strengthened through the Education Ordinance No. 31 of 1938, ensuring access to education for children aged 5–16, further reinforced by the introduction of free education by Kannangara. Over time, educational reforms have aimed at developing students' cognitive, skills-based, and attitudinal competencies to meet the challenges of the modern world. Within this context, vocational education has emerged as a critical component for enhancing employability and practical skills among students.

The 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program, introduced in 2017 by the Ministry of Education, aims to ensure that all students remain in school up to Grade 13, regardless of their performance at the G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination. The program particularly targets students who are unable to enter the traditional Advanced Level streams, offering them vocational pathways leading to National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) Level 4 certification. Initially implemented as a pilot in 42 schools and later expanded to over 150 schools, the program seeks to reduce dropout rates, enhance skill development, and promote self-employment opportunities (Ministry of Education, 2017).

Despite these objectives, plantation sector students—particularly in geographically and socioeconomically disadvantaged regions such as Kegalle—demonstrate low participation and limited interest in vocational education. Plantation communities face persistent challenges including poverty, limited access to educational resources, poor infrastructure, and restricted opportunities for higher education. These factors significantly influence students' educational aspirations and career choices (National Institute of Education, 2018). Furthermore, transportation difficulties, long travel distances, and high costs act as barriers to accessing vocational training institutions.

Parental attitudes and social perceptions also play a crucial role. Many parents in plantation communities have low levels of educational attainment and tend to prioritize immediate income-generating activities over long-term educational investments. Additionally, vocational education is often perceived as less prestigious compared to academic pathways, leading to reduced encouragement from families and communities (Santhakumar, 2020). Gender disparities further complicate the issue, as female students are often discouraged from pursuing vocational training due to cultural expectations and preferences for traditional or government employment (Ragupathi, 2022).

Institutional challenges also contribute to the problem. Limited availability of Tamil-medium vocational education, inadequate resources, shortage of trained teachers, and insufficient practical facilities hinder effective implementation. Language barriers arise when instruction is predominantly delivered in Sinhala or English, reducing comprehension and engagement among Tamil-speaking students. Moreover, the lack of digital infrastructure and access to online learning tools further restricts participation (World Bank, 2019; Research Studies, 2020).

Empirical evidence highlights the severity of the issue. In the Kegalle Educational Zone, although a significant proportion of students fail to qualify for Advanced Level education, only a small percentage enroll in the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program. Reports indicate that nearly 57.6% of students do not pass the G.C.E. O/L examination, yet only about 12.2% continue in the guaranteed education pathway. This gap raises concerns about the effectiveness and outreach of the program (Kegalle Zonal Education Office, 2023).

Accordingly, the central research problem of this study is the low level of interest among plantation sector students in vocational education under the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program. This study aims to identify the factors influencing students' interest, including social, economic, familial, and school-related determinants. The primary objective is to assess the level of interest in vocational education among plantation students, while the specific objectives include examining parental attitudes, social influences, economic constraints, institutional factors, and the role of vocational training centers.

The study is guided by key research questions addressing how these factors influence students' decisions to engage in vocational education. Given the importance of vocational skills in addressing unemployment and promoting economic mobility, this research is significant in identifying barriers and proposing strategies to enhance participation. Previous studies conducted in regions such as Batticaloa and Kandy similarly highlight low awareness, limited motivation, and structural challenges in implementing vocational education programs effectively (Kamalnathan, 2023; Jayawardhanapura University Studies).

In conclusion, although the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program represents a progressive policy initiative aimed at inclusive education and skill development, its success remains constrained in plantation sector contexts. Therefore, this study seeks to provide evidence-based recommendations to improve awareness, accessibility, and effectiveness of vocational education, ultimately contributing to equitable educational opportunities and sustainable socio-economic development.

## METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a descriptive research design to examine plantation sector students' interest in vocational education under the 13 Years Guaranteed Education Program. A mixed-method approach was employed, integrating both quantitative and qualitative techniques to provide a comprehensive understanding of the research problem. The quantitative component enabled the measurement of students' interest levels and trends,

while the qualitative component explored underlying social, economic, and institutional factors influencing their participation (Arulappan, 2024; Chandrasekaran, 2023).

The study was conducted in the Kegalle Educational Zone of the Sabaragamuwa Province, focusing on Tamil-medium schools. Out of 18 schools in the zone, 10 schools (5 from Kegalle division and 5 from Warakapola division) were selected for the study. The study population consisted of 229 Grade 11 students who sat for the 2024 G.C.E. Ordinary Level examination, 62 teachers, 10 principals, and representatives from vocational training institutions. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across different groups within the population. Based on this method, a total sample of 115 students (male and female), 56 teachers, 11 principals, and vocational training stakeholders was selected (Krejcie & Morgan, 1970).

Data was collected using multiple instruments. Primary data were gathered through structured questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and focus group discussions. Separate questionnaires were designed for students, teachers, and principals, incorporating Likert-scale and open-ended questions. Secondary data were obtained from school records, reports, and official documents. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and tables, with the support of SPSS and Excel software. Qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

**Table 1: General Information of Participating Principals**

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
School Type	Type 1AB	5	45.5
	Type 1C	5	45.5
	Type 2	1	9
Gender	Male	10	90
	Female	1	10
Service Grade	SLPS I	3	27.3
	SLPS II	4	36.4
	SLPS III	3	27.3
	Other	1	9
Years of Service	1–5 years	2	18.2
	6–10 years	3	27.3
	11–16 years	4	36.4
	Above 16 years	2	18.2
Educational Qualification	GCE A/L	1	9
	Bachelor’s Degree	5	45.5
	Master’s Degree	3	27.3
	Other Professional	1	9
	PhD	0	0
ICT Competency	Basic	4	36.4
	Intermediate	5	45.5
	Advanced	2	18.2

(Source: Principles Questionnaire, 2025)

The table shows that the majority of principals are from Type 1AB and Type 1C schools, indicating strong representation from schools offering advanced level education. There is a significant gender imbalance, with most principals being male. In terms of professional background, most principals belong to mid-level service grades (SLPS II) and have more than 10 years of experience, reflecting a relatively experienced group. Regarding qualifications, the majority hold bachelor’s and master’s degrees, while no principals possess doctoral qualifications. ICT competency is mostly at the basic to intermediate level, suggesting limited advanced digital skills among principals.

**Table 2: Principals’ Perceptions on 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program**

Category	Key Indicators	Mean Range	SD Range
Program Implementation	Acceptance, student interest, practical subjects, NVQ value, training, continuation	4.27 – 4.73	0.46 – 0.67
Resource Availability	Awareness, physical & human resources, teaching aids, workshops, exams, qualified teachers	4.27 – 4.64	0.50 – 0.67
Economic Factors	Low income, estate background, student dropout for work, food issues, financial barriers	4.27 – 4.55	0.52 – 0.67

(Source: Principles Questionnaire, 2025)

Overall, principals show a strong positive perception of the 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program, with all mean values above 4.0. Student interest and the value of NVQ certification stand out as particularly high. However, despite these positive attitudes, resource-related challenges such as limited teaching aids, human resources, and infrastructure affect effective implementation. Additionally, economic constraints play a significant role. Many students come from low-income and estate-sector backgrounds, leading to issues like school dropout for employment and difficulty continuing education. In summary, while the program is well-accepted and valued, practical limitations and socio-economic barriers hinder its full success.

**Table 3: Teachers’ General Information**

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
School Type	Type 1AB	32	49.23%
	Type 1C	24	36.92%
	Type 2	5	7.69%
School Location	Urban	22	33.85%
	Estate	43	66.15%
Age Distribution	20–30	10	15.38%
	31–40	18	27.69%
	41–50	22	33.85%
	51–60	15	23.08%
Teaching Experience	1–5 years	15	23.08%
	6–10 years	20	30.77%
	11–16 years	18	27.69%
	16+ years	12	18.46%
Educational Qualifications	O/L	8	12.31%
	A/L	12	18.46%
	Bachelor’s Degree	20	30.77%
	Master’s Degree	15	23.08%
	Others	10	15.38%
ICT Qualifications	Certificate	25	38.46%
	Diploma	20	30.77%
	Degree	20	30.77%

(Source: Teachers Questionnaire, 2025)

The data shows that most teachers are from Type 1AB schools and estate areas, indicating a strong focus on disadvantaged regions. The majority are middle-aged and experienced, with many having 6–16 years of teaching experience. In terms of qualifications, most teachers hold bachelor’s or master’s degrees, reflecting a well-qualified workforce. However, ICT qualifications are mainly at the certificate and diploma levels, suggesting only moderate digital competency among teachers.

**Table 4: Teachers’ Perceptions on Vocational Education Implementation**

Category	Key Indicators	Mean Range	SD Range
Implementation of Program	Teacher interest, student awareness, dropout reduction, future opportunities, self-employment, social development, parental support, student interest, economic barriers	4.12 – 4.64	0.50 – 0.68
Resource Availability	Awareness, physical & human resources, modern teaching aids, practical teaching, motivation, qualified teachers, competitions, exams, workshops, supervision	4.27 – 4.64	0.50 – 0.67
Economic Factors	Estate background, low income, student dropout for work	4.18 – 4.36	0.62 – 0.68

(Source: Teachers Questionnaire, 2025)

Teachers generally show a strong positive attitude toward implementing the 13-Year Guaranteed Education and vocational education programs, with all mean values above 4.0. They believe the program can reduce dropout rates, improve student futures, and promote self-employment. However, several key challenges are evident. There is low student awareness, limited parental support, and reduced student interest, which affect participation. Resource-related issues such as lack of modern equipment, insufficient trained teachers, and weak practical implementation also hinder effectiveness. Additionally, economic constraints including low family income and students leaving school for work further limit the success of the program. Overall, while teachers support the initiative, practical and socio-economic barriers impact its full implementation.

**General Information of Students**

Table 5: General Information of Students

Variable	Category	Number	Percentage (%)
School Type	Type 1AB	110	48.03
	Type 1C	73	31.88
	Type 2	10	4.37
	Others / Not Specified	36	15.72
School Location	Estate Sector	137	60
	Urban Area	92	40
Gender	Male	60	26.2
	Female	50	21.83
	Others / Not Specified	119	51.97
Residence	Estate Sector	199	87
	Urban Area	30	13
Ethnicity	Tamil	199	87
	Muslim	30	13
Distance to School	<5 km	10	4.37
	6–10 km	50	21.83
	11–15 km (estimated)	60	26.2
	>15 km (estimated)	109	47.6
Mode of Transport	Walking	90	39.3
	Public Transport	10	4.37
	Private Transport	5	2.18
	Others / Not Specified	124	54.15
Number of Siblings	0	40	17.47
	1	60	26.2
	2	30	13.1
	3	20	8.73
	Others / Not Specified	79	34.5

Living Arrangement	Parents	80	34.93
	Guardian	40	17.47
	Siblings	20	8.73
	Others	10	4.37
	Not Specified	79	34.5
School Attendance	1–10 days	25	10.92
	11–20 days	40	17.47
	21–30 days	30	13.1
	31–40 days	35	15.28
	41–50 days	20	8.73
	>50 days	10	4.37
	Not Specified	69	30.13
Exam Performance	1–20	10	4.37
	21–40	60	26.2
	41–60	43	18.78
	61–80	30	13.1
	81–100	15	6.55
	Not Specified	71	31
Preferred A/L Stream	Arts	55	24.02
	Commerce	30	13.1
	Biology	20	8.73
	Physical Science	17	7.42
	Bio Systems Tech	15	6.55
	Engineering Tech	10	4.37
	13-Year Education	10	4.37
	Not Specified	72	31.44
Career Preference	Teacher	35	15.28
	Engineer	25	10.92
	Academic	20	8.73
	Industry	20	8.73
	Banking	15	6.55
	Nursing	15	6.55
	Doctor	13	5.68
	Technician	10	4.37
	Not Specified	76	33.19
Mother's Education	Below Grade 5	23	10.04
	Below Grade 9	38	16.59
	Below O/L	55	24.02
	Below A/L	28	12.23
	Degree	17	7.42
	Postgraduate	10	4.37
	Not Specified	58	25.33
Father's Education	Below Grade 5	20	8.73
	Below Grade 9	35	15.28
	Below O/L	55	24.02
	Below A/L	18	7.86
	Degree	12	5.24
	Postgraduate	8	3.49
	Not Specified	81	35.37

Monthly Income (LKR)	<20,000	40	17.47
	21,000–40,000	33	14.41
	41,000–60,000	50	21.83
	61,000–80,000	20	8.73
	81,000–100,000	18	7.86
	>100,000	13	5.68
	Not Specified	55	24.02

(Source: Students Questionnaire, 2025)

The data shows that most students come from Type 1AB schools and estate-sector backgrounds, indicating a focus on relatively disadvantaged communities. Gender participation appears uneven due to missing responses, but overall representation exists across groups. Many students travel moderate to long distances, often walking to school, and come from low- to middle-income families with relatively low parental education levels. Academic performance is mostly concentrated in the middle score ranges, and students show a stronger preference for Arts and Commerce streams. Career aspirations are diverse, with teaching and engineering being the most preferred. Overall, the data highlights that socio-economic challenges, access issues, and educational background significantly influence students’ educational pathways and future choices.

**Table 6: Students’ Perspectives on the 13-Year Education Program**

Category	Key Indicators	Mean Range	SD Range
Socio-Economic Background	Estate/line housing, low family income, students leaving for work, provision of meals, economic difficulties affecting continuation	4.18 – 4.45	0.57 – 0.68
Interest in Education	Pleasant learning environment, daily attendance with interest, good exam marks, expectation to qualify for A/L, interest in government job/self-employment	4.18 – 4.45	0.50 – 0.68
Awareness of Vocational / 13-Year Program	Clear awareness of program, willingness to select if A/L fails, peer support, self-employment opportunities, estate students receive fewer benefits	4.18 – 4.55	0.52 – 0.68
Family & Social Support	Parents’ awareness, siblings’ awareness, community self-employment, parental support, neighbor encouragement	4.27 – 4.64	0.50 – 0.65
Resource Availability	Adequate schools, sufficient teachers, teaching materials, facilities for final training, financial support for self-employment	4.27 – 4.45	0.55 – 0.65
Economic Factors Affecting Implementation	Estate housing background, low family income, students dropping out for work, ability to provide basic meals, economic issues affecting continuation	4.18 – 4.36	0.58 – 0.68

(Source: Students Questionnaire, 2025)

The consolidated table shows that students generally have a positive perception of the 13-Year Education Program, with mean values ranging from 4.18 to 4.64 across all categories. They report strong interest in learning, good awareness of the program, and supportive family and community engagement, indicating motivation to continue their education. However, socio-economic and economic factors such as estate housing, low family income, and students leaving school for work remain significant challenges, which may affect program participation and continuity. Similarly, while resources for implementation including schools, teachers,

teaching materials, and financial support are available, they are not fully sufficient to ensure optimal learning outcomes.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the study reveal several important aspects regarding the implementation of the 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program from the perspectives of principals, teachers, and students, highlighting both its strengths and the challenges faced. Principals' responses indicate strong support for the program, with mean scores consistently above 4.0, reflecting their recognition of the program's potential to enhance student engagement and provide meaningful opportunities for future employment and self-employment. They also emphasized the value of certification and practical subjects in motivating students, suggesting that the program is viewed as both relevant and necessary in the school system. However, principals identified gaps in parental involvement, student awareness, and economic barriers that could hinder successful implementation, particularly in estate areas, pointing to systemic issues that extend beyond the school environment.

Teachers' perspectives reinforce these findings, showing a high level of awareness and commitment to the program. Teachers reported that adequate teaching practices, supportive learning environments, and trained staff are crucial for program success, though they acknowledged limitations in physical and human resources, modern teaching aids, and student motivation. The mean scores ranged from 4.12 to 4.64, suggesting general agreement on the importance of these factors but also highlighting the challenges in translating policy into practice. Teachers also noted that resource availability, structured assessments, and encouragement from the school administration significantly influence students' participation and learning outcomes. The study indicates that, despite teachers' commitment, resource constraints and limited community engagement can reduce the program's overall effectiveness.

From the students' perspective, the program is largely viewed positively. They reported high interest in learning, awareness of the program, and recognition of opportunities for self-employment or continued education. Students also highlighted the importance of family and community support, which appears to reinforce their motivation. However, socio-economic factors such as living in estate areas, low family income, and the necessity for some students to leave school for work present ongoing barriers. Mean scores in these areas ranged from 4.18 to 4.64, indicating that while students are motivated, external challenges could impede consistent participation. The findings collectively suggest that while the 13-Year Education Program is valued and its potential recognized, addressing economic disadvantages, resource limitations, and community engagement is critical to ensure equitable access and long-term success. These insights provide practical guidance for policymakers and educational administrators aiming to strengthen program delivery, enhance student outcomes, and create supportive learning environments across diverse school contexts.

## CONCLUSION

The study concludes that the 13-Year Guaranteed Education Program is widely recognized by principals, teachers, and students as a valuable initiative with the potential to enhance learning outcomes, increase student engagement, and provide opportunities for future employment and self-employment. Principals demonstrated strong support for the program, emphasizing its relevance and the importance of practical subjects and certification in motivating students. Teachers echoed this commitment, highlighting the need for adequately trained staff, sufficient teaching and learning resources, and structured assessments to ensure effective program implementation. Students showed high interest in continuing education, awareness of the program, and recognition of its benefits, particularly in terms of self-employment and future career prospects. Despite this positive perception, the study also identifies significant challenges that could affect the program's success. Economic barriers, including low family income, students leaving school for work, and limited access to resources in estate areas, emerged as key constraints. Gaps in parental involvement, peer support, and community engagement further limit the program's full potential. Resource constraints, such as insufficient teaching aids, inadequate school facilities, and limited availability of qualified teachers, were also highlighted by teachers as factors that hinder effective implementation.

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