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IMPROVING EDUCATION IN THE MALDIVES: STAKEHOLDER PERSPECTIVES ON THE MALDIVIAN EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades the Maldives has seen significant improvements in access to education; however, there are still many challenges impeding quality education in the Maldives. This paper provides insight into the issues within the education system in the Maldives and identifies the key challenges which hinder the quality of education in the Maldives. In order to gain stakeholder perspectives on the Maldivian education system, a nation-wide education forum was organised with teachers, parents, students, Ministry of Education officials and representatives from key businesses in the Maldives. This paper addresses issues related the national curriculum, governance and management of schools, language in education, quality control in education and on the relationship between education and industry.

Keywords: Education, Country Profile, Maldives, Education Policy, Public Policy, MaldivesResearch, Development,

1. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades the Maldives has seen significant improvements in access to education; however, there are still many challenges impeding quality education in the Maldives. There is a growing concern with the quality of education in the Maldives. In order to gain address this growing concern with the quality of education and to gain an understanding of the issues within the education system in the Maldives from a multiple stakeholder perspective, a nationwide education was forum was organised by MaldivesResearch. The aim of this forum was to identify the key challenges facing the education sector in the Maldives, guided by five selected themes: education, training and industry; qualifications and quality control in education; school curriculum; language in education; and governance and management of schools and colleges.

1.1 *Education in the Maldives*

In the Maldives, formal education starts when children are at the age of 3 (Figure 1) and primary school education starts from the age of 6. Pupils spend 5 years at secondary level, finishing school education at 17 years of age.

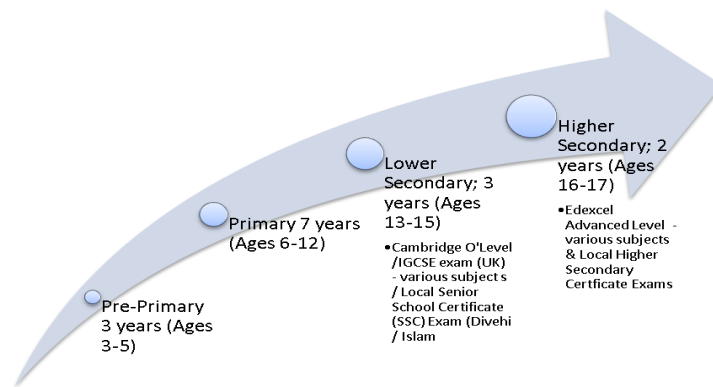


Figure 1: Various Levels in School Education in the Maldives: Adapted from MoE (2010a)

The Maldivian Constitution entitles all children to access primary and secondary education (Hussain, 2008:9). However, the compulsory education age range has yet to be given legal status, even though past initiatives have targeted all children attaining at least 7 years of primary education from the age of 6 and completing at the age of 12 (UNData, 2012). Literacy rate in the Maldives is a remarkable 96% (ranked 29th out of 121 countries) with little difference between male and female literacy rates (Nationmaster, 2012)

1.2 Student Population, Enrolments and Attainments

Across the country there are four types of schools: state-run schools, state subsidized community schools, public-private partnership schools (PPPs) and private schools. Altogether, 375 schools provide education for just under 88,000 students, a quarter of the national population. Out of these schools, 58% are state-run. Male', the capital, has 6% of the total schools providing education for 41% of the student population. In terms of equality of access for both the sexes in education, gender parity in the Maldives education system is high across all levels of school education (see Figure 2 below).

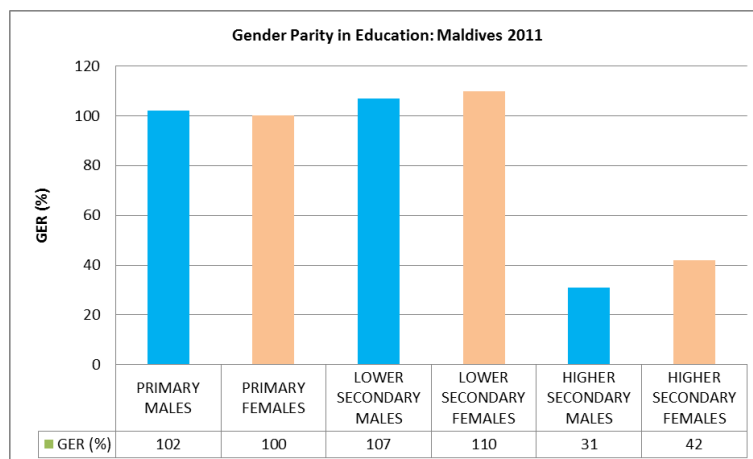


Figure 2: Gross Enrolment Ratios for Males and Females in Education (2011). Source: DNP, Maldives (2012)

National Gross Enrolment Ratios (GERs) for primary education in 2010 (Figure 3) suggest that the Maldives has a participation rate (106%) comparable to the rest of the World, including High Income countries. However, the Maldives GER for secondary education (69%), is considerably lower than the GER in High Income countries (101%). This flags secondary education as an area where the Maldives has much room for increased participation.

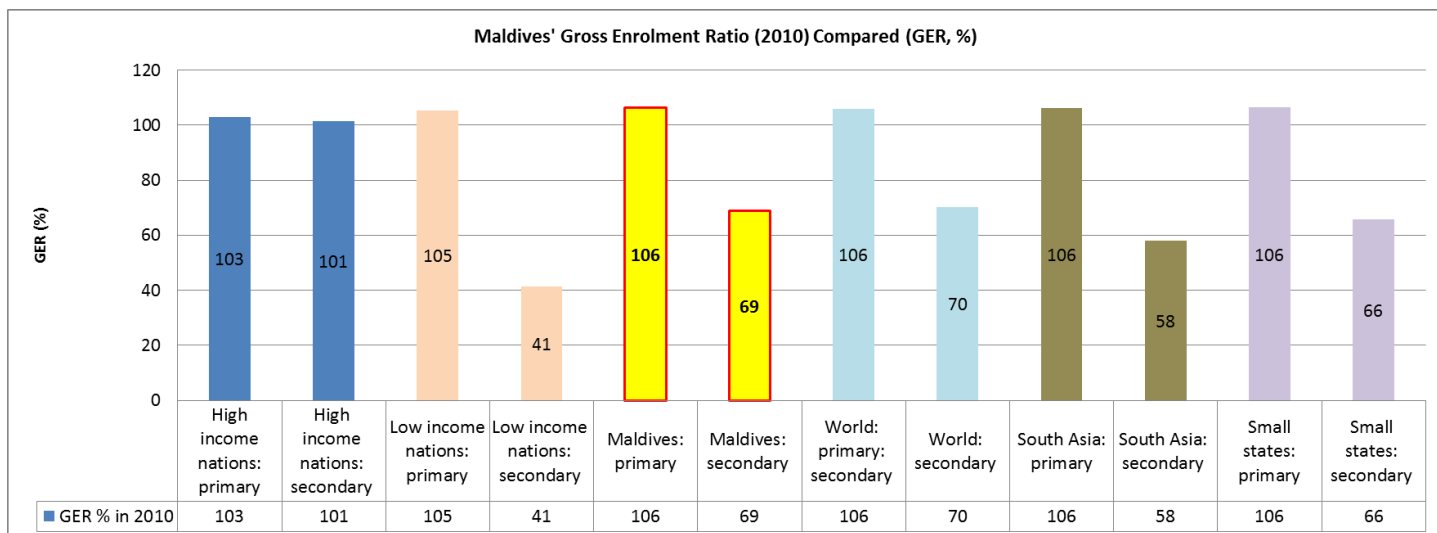


Figure 3: GER (%) for Maldives and Other Countries. Source: World Bank WDI Database (2013) & MoE (2010b)

A closer scrutiny of data suggests that the specific area that is failing to engage potential students is higher secondary education (see

Figure 4), which targets 16-17 year olds. Lower secondary education (13-15 years) enrolment rates for the three years exceed even primary education figures. However, barring a gradual improving trend, the higher secondary education enrolment rates have been alarmingly low at 18% in 2009 and 36% in 2011. Such disengagement from education amongst young people may give rise to or contribute to many nationwide social issues such as high unemployment and high crime rates.

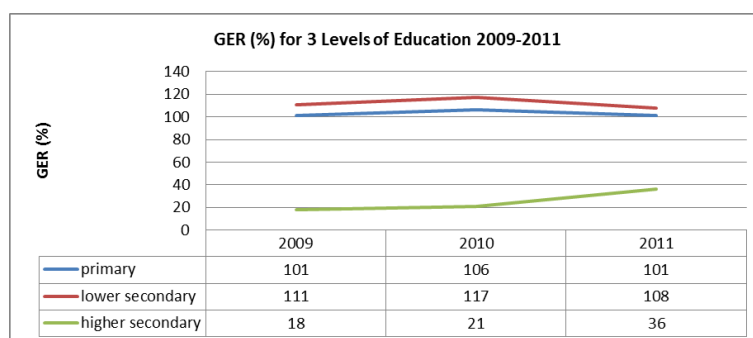


Figure 4: Maldives' GER in the 3 Levels of School Education. Source: DNP, Maldives (2012)

For tertiary education, the participation rate is even lower, at 13% of the eligible population (see Figure 5).

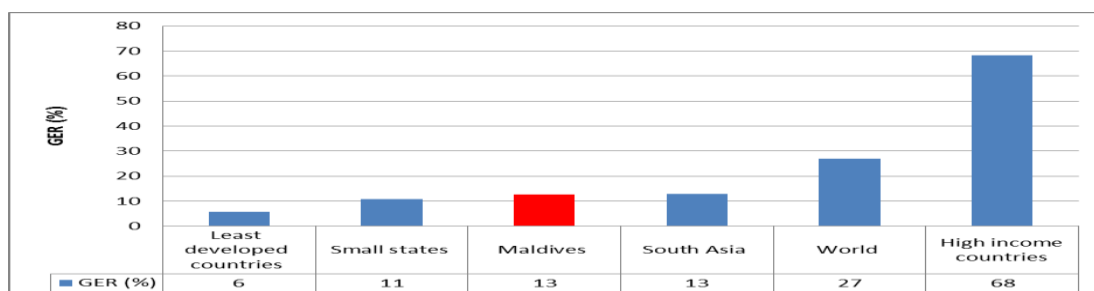


Figure 5: GER (%) in Tertiary Education in Maldives and Other Countries (2008). Source: World Bank WID Database (2013)

The primary school completion rate in the Maldives is high at 140% in 2005 and 114% in 2010 (Figure 6 below) and the Maldives has a much higher rate than many developing countries. The Maldives' primary completion rates are also higher than the world's average and that of the High Income countries, which include the world's 70 richest nations or High-Income countries as defined by the World Bank (2013b). However, figures exceeding 100% also show that there is a relatively high number of students completing

their primary education after their expected graduation age, perhaps because there are some children who start their primary school at an older age than expected.

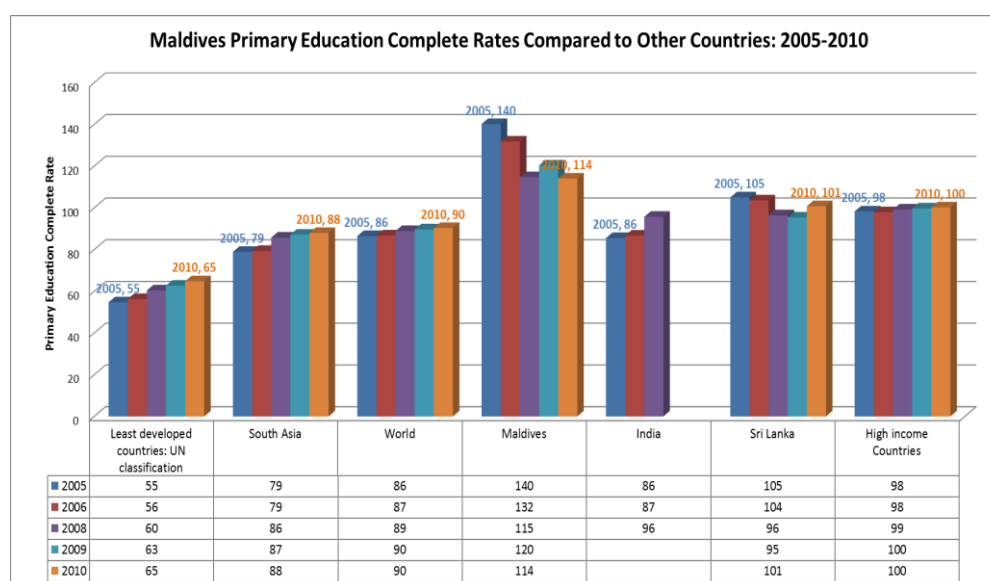


Figure 6: Primary Completion Rate for the Maldives and Other Countries (2005-2010). Source: World Bank WDI Database (2013)

In lower secondary school, the attainment rates have been a concern for some time. In the lower secondary grade 10 Cambridge IGCSE/GCE examinations, only 27% of students achieved a pass (Grades A-C) in 5 subjects or more in 2008, although there has been some improvement in the pass rates between 2008 and 2011 (see Figure 7). More concerning is the fact that 16% of students did not achieve a single pass in 2011, despite an 8% improvement since 2008. Hameed (2012) notes that 6 million Maldivian Rufiyaa (est. US\$390,000) had been spent on exam fees of students who had not achieved any passes in 2008.

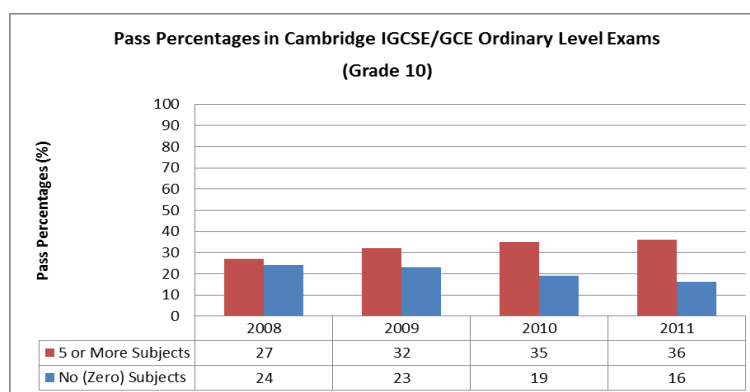


Figure 7: Pass Percentages in the Cambridge IGCSE/GCE Ordinary Level Exams 2008-2011. Source: DNP, Maldives (2012)

With regards to tertiary education, in 2011 the country had sixteen institutes providing further, vocational and higher education courses, of which five were government owned. There is currently one university, the Maldives National University (MNU), which is government-run and in 2011 accounted for 45% of total tertiary education enrolments (DNP, 2012). Generally, the sector delivers programmes ranging from one year diplomas to four year honours degrees and two year Masters programmes (UNESCO-IBE, 2011). In terms of trends in student numbers, a positive pattern has emerged at this early stage of tertiary education in the Maldives. Compared to the statistics in 2010, there was a considerable increase in enrolment numbers and graduate outputs in 2011, both of which increased by more than 60% and 50% respectively (see Figure 8). This trend should continue in order to be at par with other comparable countries (see **Figure 3**, p. 25 above). At the same time, a concern has to be raised at the sharp increase in dropouts, which amounted to a threefold increase to 1,591 students in 2011.

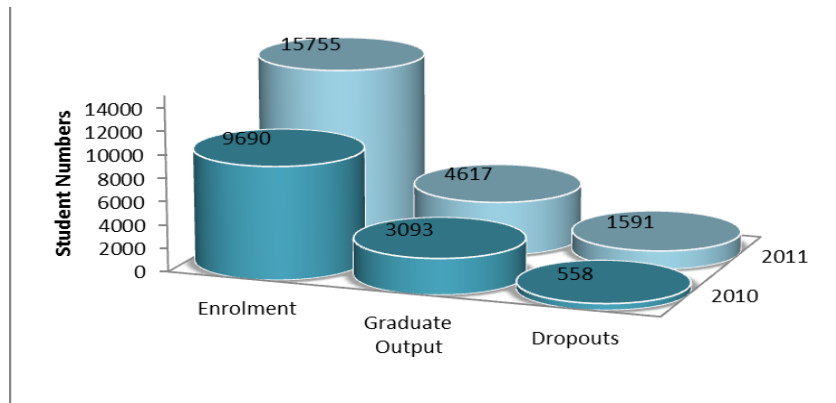


Figure 8: Student Numbers in Tertiary Education 2010-2011; Calculated from: DPN (2010) and DPN (2011)

1.3 Resource Input

In terms of resource input into education, in 2009 the Maldives spent a relatively large percentage of its GDP (7.8%) on education, significantly higher than its 2008 spending as a percentage of GDP (see Figure 9). However, the World Bank (2012) reports that more recently the expenditure has been decreasing overall. Compared to 2008, 2011 saw a sharp fall of the total public expenditure on education by 12% to 1,098 Million Rufiyaa. This may present a challenge to any improvements in education, for instance in tackling the low participation in higher secondary education described earlier.



Figure 9: Public Expenditure on Education in the Maldives as a % of GDP: 2008-2009; Source: World Bank Databank, 2013

Teachers form an important part of the state input into education. The Maldives had a student-teacher ratio of 12:1 in 2011 (DNP, 2012), which is amongst the world's lowest ratios (World Bank, 2012). One reason for this is because many island communities are small and have small student populations. Based on the figures in 2011 (DNP, 2012), amongst this pool of teachers 15% were untrained and there has been a significant reliance on expatriate teachers (31%), especially in secondary education (61%). In primary schools, altogether 371 (10%) teachers were expatriates. The World Bank (2012) argues that this creates issues such as students being taught by those who have limited knowledge about local needs, contexts and culture. This situation is also the case in the rural communities where the expatriate teachers take up 33% of posts.

3. Methodology

3.1 Literature Review and Methodological Rationale

Past research into perceptions of the education sector prevalent in the Maldives has led to the identification of ways of improving the experiences of stakeholders. In a survey conducted by Booth et al. (2008) focussing on student teachers' perceptions of what enhances learning in primary schools in the Maldives and Fiji, open ended survey questions were used to obtain data. Respondents completed a three question paper-based survey, which was completed in classrooms by student teachers. The study led to the identification of ways of managing teaching resources better, changing behaviour and perceptions that may have undesired effects on pupils, and ways of improving the learner experience in classrooms.

Voluntary Service Overseas, a UK-based international organisation, published an extensive and in-depth case study (VSO, 2009) into the difficulties faced by school leaders in the Maldives atolls (i.e. outside the capital, Male') in the leaders' efforts to improve the quality of education in the Maldives. The researcher in the study relied on conference discussions, oral stories, interviews and observation of school processes (lessons, training sessions and analysis of documentation) to gather data. The research report refers to discussion group methods as "the most productive" because participants would feel less threatened in such an atmosphere. In our research, we used this method as the main form of data collection for the same reason. Similar to the discussion groups in the VSO case studies, we allowed debate to take place in the local language as opposed to English in order to remove the constraints associated with the use of a foreign language. However, we did not use a multi-method approach due to time, the size of the budget and practical constraints. Nevertheless, triangulation of perceptions occurred through the structure of participant grouping, which ensuring that each discussion group had at least one representative from each of the main stakeholder groups. In addition, the use of notes from the note-takers and the notes from forum participants allowed us to triangulate the data.

Another study worth referring to is Shareef's (2005) study on distance education in the Maldives. In this study, students' perceptions of computer-based distance education system were examined. The study lends support to the idea that educational improvement-oriented research should consider views of students (Shareef, 2005: 160), who are the most direct stakeholders in an educational service. Hence, our research ensured students were invited to the forum and their views formed an important part of the data.

As already indicated, stakeholders' perceptions form the bulk of our data but this study should be not treated as an attempt to generalise the participants' views as representative views of the main stakeholder population. Our aim was to analyse the stakeholders' views in order to gain a glimpse into the way the education systems and services in place are understood. By doing so, we also aim to unravel issues that stakeholders have experienced in either delivering or using the services. Education policy makers, implementers and benefiteres alike would then have access to our observations and the recommendations that we make to better inform plans and delivery and, equally importantly, understand the services better in the future.

3.2 *Data Collection*

Participants were allocated into groups and given specific topics to discuss. Each group had at least one stakeholder participant.

All discussion groups had the research questions and resources ready for them as they arrived and were reminded of the necessity to discuss the topics and the research questions as openly and as impartially possible. Four researchers from MaldivesResearch, who led the forum, monitored the discussions and clarified any ambiguities and questions that arose during the discussions. Following the discussions of each of the two topics for each group, each group had their own nominated leader taking their own notes for feeding back to the forum discussion in the afternoon

3.3 *Limitations and Challenges*

This study by design was aimed at collecting the views of stakeholders from grassroots to policy level, and to allow stakeholder groups to identify problems and suggest solutions. Whilst we are optimistic about the potential contribution this study may make to policy formulation, it is not without its limitations. Discussions were primarily aimed at opening up dialogue and identifying problems and suggesting solutions from a Maldivian perspective, which we understand may not present the most prioritised issues or the most feasible solutions in all cases. Whilst we sought to collect a representative sample of stakeholders to take part in the forum, we recognise that the problems identified by individual participants may not be representative of the views across the population and can be subjective views. The views of the participants may also be influenced by more dominating participants or by participants who are already involved in policy making.

The forum was not intended to cover all the issues related to education in the Maldives and we selected five specific themes in order to cover areas which are of most relevance and interest, and within the scope of our research enquiry. We recognise that our selective bias in the topics may appear to emphasize particular issues and this may be considered a limitation. However, considering the scope of our research, it is hoped that the topics selected covered key areas relevant to the current education system in the Maldives. In the proceeding chapter we provide further explanation on the selection of the specific themes and questions for the forum.

We also encountered a few practical challenges whilst planning, designing and implementing the study, particularly because the majority of the project team was based in the UK. Participants' feedback noted that forum questions could have been sent to them in advance. However, the fact that participants did not receive

the questions too far in advance may have made the data more valid because it did not allow participants to prepare set answers. Whilst this report was written using the notes from note-takers, presentation slides, and participant notes, we do recognise that note-takers notes may also be subjective and the quality of notes was not uniform across the board. However, the variety of note-keeping methods we used (such as presentation slides, participant notes, moderator's notes) ensured that the authenticity of the forum discussions was maintained.

4. The Education Forum

4.1 Topics of the forum

Participants in the forum were invited to discuss key questions under the five themes of:

1. Education, Training and Industry
2. Qualifications and Quality Control in Education
3. School Curriculum
4. Language in Education
5. Governance and Management of Schools and Colleges

4.1.1 Education, Training and Industry. This topic relates to the link between education both at school and tertiary levels, and the needs of the country's industries. Sheryn (2011) suggests that there is scarcity of human resources related to the gap between education and industry's need for sufficiently qualified and skilled human resources. Through the stakeholders' voice in the form of responses to questions on the school leavers' skills, and examples of skills needed, the forum aimed to explore this deficit.

4.1.2 Qualifications and Quality Control in Education. The public in many countries may expect assurances in the quality of education. For instance, in Singapore, school ranking systems and external inspections were heavily relied upon in the 1990s, but were then superseded by an externally validated self-assessment system (Ng, 2007). In the Maldives, there is currently a drive supported by UNICEF to introduce CFBS (Child Friendly Barabaru Schools), a holistic quality indicators framework (MoE-UNICEF, 2010), within which a school quality assurance system will cater for self-assessment and external validation of schools' self-assessment. The MoE Education Supervision and Quality Improvement Division (ESQID) aims to launch this system in 2013. In the forum, questions were asked in order to ascertain the level of awareness about any existing quality control systems and attitudes towards such controlling and monitoring.

One notable development in the country's education over the last decade has been an increase in the number of qualifications available to the public. There is now increasing private sector involvement, where qualifications endorsed by the individual educational institutions themselves as well as internationally endorsed qualifications are available. Hence, there is a need for some coherence and standard-setting for the benefit of individual education-seekers. This need is seen to be critical in order to distinguish between genuine and invalid qualifications and accreditation bodies abroad. The government authority in charge of the much needed vetting of qualifications is the Maldives Qualifications Authority (MQA) and an important part of its function is to ensure "that students, employers, education providers and the community at large easily understand the learning outcomes involved in various qualifications" (MQA, 2010). Through the relevant research question and its prompts the forum sought to collect views related to the quality of the services provided by MQA.

4.1.3 School Curriculum. The forum took place at a time when a four year-long National Curriculum reform process was nearing completion. The Educational Development Centre (EDC, 2011) envisages the implementation of the first phase of the new curriculum in 2013. Our forum attempted to focus on the coverage of the curriculum in terms of learners with special needs and the relevance of the curriculum to contemporary social, economic and political issues.

4.1.4 Language in Education. We also attempted to collect stakeholder perceptions about using Dhivehi (the local language), English and Arabic as the medium of instruction in schools. In addition, the questions under this topic included those related to the introduction of more international languages in the school curriculum.

English medium schools in the Maldives were introduced in the country in the early 1960s (UNESCO-IBE, 2011) and today almost all schools use English as a medium of instruction apart from in the subjects of Islam (the study of the Islam) and Dhivehi (the study of the national language). There is one Arabic medium school, which specialises in Islam and Legal studies amongst others. Dhivehi medium schools operated in the past at primary school level but have been gradually replaced with English medium schools. Opportunities to

learn foreign languages apart from English and Arabic in the school system have been scarce until 2009. Reforms to the curriculum opened up possibilities for students to learn a foreign language in addition to English (UNESCO-IBE, 2011).

4.1.5 Governance and Management of Schools and Colleges. The purpose of this final topic was to establish whether, in the view of the participants, there are sufficient opportunities for stakeholders to engage with and contribute to the processes of governance and management in schools and colleges.

In 2010, for the first time the MoE announced a requirement for all schools to be governed by their individual school boards at school level (MoE, 2011). Due to initial difficulties in implementation, school boards' functions were changed from governance to advisory roles whereby boards were required to:

- undertake strategic decision-making and assessment of the school's performance
- advise schools in their activities and approve school's activity calendars (including fund-raising activities)
- advise schools in the running of their Parent Teacher Associations (PTAs)
- contribute to the improvement of the students' performance and conduct
- advise schools on budgetary matters
- ensure that schools follow regulatory requirements in project tenders and bidding processes
- provide guidance in management staff recruitment matters; and
- formulate and implement a governance framework for school boards and communicate board activities to the schools and the public.

Boards may be composed of parents, the principal, PTA representatives, the school's financial managers, teachers and administrative staff members, and a representative from the MoE. The World Bank (2012) report on the Maldives education system, citing examples from other small nations such as the Seychelles and Trinidad and Tobago, essentially advocates such school-based management systems on the basis of the cost and procedural effectiveness of such systems. However, the report also highlights the need for empowerment and capacity building in small island communities so that stakeholders such as parents can fully contribute to school boards.

Some of the questions in the forum also covered questions related to the appeal and quality of the country's tertiary education providers.

4.2 Stakeholder Groups: Forum Participants

When identifying the invitees for the forum, attention was paid to the representation of those from society who benefit directly from the education services and those who are directly involved in day-to-day education provision. Substantial attention was paid to balance private and public sector participation. Care was given to ensuring regional representation from the Northern Provinces, the Southern Provinces and Male', the capital. Another consideration was to include participants from all levels of education, in terms of pre-school, primary, secondary, further (vocational) and higher/university level education. However, in the student category, invitations were sent only to secondary and higher level students, and not to primary and lower school children as the forum relied on in-depth discussions of issues in a format not easily accessible to the involvement of such young participants.

The following seven categories of stakeholders were invited to the forum:

- Teachers from schools, colleges and the National University
- Students from schools, colleges and the National University
- Parent Teacher Association representatives from schools
- Distinguished educationalists
- Principals and senior managers from schools, colleges and the National University
- Education Ministry officials
- Private and state business sector individual

Altogether 55 invitations were sent to participants across the country and 44 participants attended the forum. This was seen as a positive response and a high participation rate (80%) in the forum.

In deciding the institutions and schools to invite, schools statistics provided by MoE (2010) were consulted. Schools with higher student numbers in each region (Male', the Northern and Southern atolls) were given a higher priority. Other factors taken into account were the transport facilities in the atolls. This was for easier transportation of representatives to Male' as MaldivesResearch, via the sponsors, bore the transport and accommodation cost of the participants from the atolls. Private organisations were chosen after considering the length of time they had been in operation in the Maldives. Government departments which had a direct policy influence on the topics of the forum were also invited. A special category of 'distinguished educationalist' was included to obtain the views of prominent personnel who had contributed to the education sector continuously over a long period of time. Five such individuals were invited and one attended the event.

5. Key findings

5.1 *Education, Training and Industry: Does education meet employer needs?*

Participants explored the linkages between secondary education and industry needs in the Maldives. In line with Sheryn's (2011) suggestion (see p. 29, above) that there was a general consensus amongst participants that skills development and training for business and industry needs was lacking in secondary education, despite the fact that over 70 per cent of students choose to study within the Business stream at secondary level. Whilst it was agreed that students cannot be prepared for very specific fields at secondary level of education and that there are variations in student numbers and resources across the country, the key skills necessary for the key Maldivian employment sectors are identifiable.

It was argued that school teaching in the Maldives was too result-oriented, whereby parents and teachers emphasise grades over learning, resulting in a lack of focus on other activities that develop skills, such as extra-curricular activities and practical learning. Although work ethics such as punctuality, commitment, respect and responsibility are ethics students also learn in school environments (or within the school system), these ethics were recognised as significantly lacking in school leavers when they enter work environments. Business skills such as communication, customer service, time-management, and leadership skills were discussed as the key skills that need to be focused on in order to better prepare students for the work environment.

In the past, secondary students were encouraged to complete fifteen days of work experience prior to leaving school, but this scheme is no longer practised or monitored in schools. The need for vocational training was also stressed by participants. Vocational training, whereby students are allowed to undertake learning through practical or work-based learning and apprenticeship programmes, particularly in key employment sectors, was suggested as ways of allowing students to gain relevant experience and skills.

The discussions concluded that the lack of focus on professional skills and work ethic necessary for the work environment proves to be disadvantageous to both students and employers and there is great scope for further research and development in this area.

5.2 *Qualifications and Quality Control in Education*

Quality control in education in the Maldives is overseen by the Supervision and Quality Improvement Division (ESQID) of the MoE. Internally, some schools also have their own mechanisms set up for quality assurance. However, participants noted that quality control/assurance is not maintained across the board and there are gaps within the current framework and practices of ESQID and schools.

The failure within the quality control system in schools is evident given the relatively high number of students that are promoted to a higher grade despite failing compulsory subjects and this is seen as a long unchecked practice within the schooling system of the Maldives. Teachers and parents at the forum raised concerns as to why in some schools there are illiterate students in grades as high as grade five. Participants noted that the current student support activities in schools focus excessively on brighter students and neglects students who fall behind or are low achievers. Students are distributed across a grade based on their level of achievement and more often than not, schools fail to provide the additional support needed by low achieving students.

Whilst all participants agreed that a quality assurance body such as ESQID is integral, ESQID's robustness and independence was questioned. As ESQID is the only quality assurance body in the education sector and falls under the remit of the MoE, questions were raised whether its assessments are free from influence from the the Ministry and whether ESQID itself was monitored and supported. Some representatives from the MoE highlighted a lack of trained staff and budget as key reasons hindering the successful implementation of the quality control initiatives of ESQID. If the lack of resources continues to be

a significant issue, there may be implications for the success of ESQID's quality initiative, CFBS (see p. 29), to be launched in 2013. Furthermore, even if CFBS is implemented, it can be argued that without at least the professional independence the participants called for, the public's trust in the system may be put at risk. It is important that CFBS includes the external verification of internal school self-assessments as this may be a critical issue of nationwide standards as suggested by the participants.

The quality control mechanisms in the Maldives are in need of a thorough review as the mandated body, ESQID, and the internal quality control in schools appears to be inconsistent, unregulated and ineffective. Participants were of the view that quality control in education is currently not fit-for-purpose because of the disparity in the standard of education across schools in Male' and other islands; the lack of resources and autonomy needed for ESQID to successfully implement its initiatives; and an absence of effective quality assurance practices within schools.

As part of the discussion on quality control, participants also discussed the role of Maldives Qualification Authority (MQA) in the quality control of qualifications. MQA is the government body mandated to assure the quality of post-secondary qualifications. Currently, qualification validation by MQA is an essential part of pre-employment screening for government and most private sector jobs. Discussions on MQA mainly concerned its transparency, accessibility and efficiency in their service delivery to the public. The MQA website stands as a useful tool to access information on the current national qualification framework; however, participants noted that there is a general lack of awareness and knowledge amongst the public and more importantly, training providers, regarding the difference between various levels of qualifications and how to use the national qualification framework as a guidance for their own verification. Participants argued that this discrepancy in information is reflected in the way training providers misinform post-secondary education seekers into enrolling on unaccredited qualifications. The accreditation procedure by MQA was also scrutinised by most participants as inconvenient because of the amount of paperwork, length of procedure and the discrepancies in the information provided by the MQA.

Some participants also argued that the current national framework is too rigid and lacking in clarity. For instance, the MNQF does not differentiate clearly between Level 7 Bachelor's degree and Level 8 Bachelors' degree with Honours. Participants agreed that the current MNQF requires further clarification on the qualification categories in order to provide more clarity to education seekers and training providers. Whilst participants recognise the public engagement initiatives undertaken by the MQA, all participants agreed that the MQA should increase its engagement in public advocacy and knowledge transfer.

5.3 *The School Curriculum*

A new National Curriculum is to be implemented in 2013 in the Maldives and a summary of the proposed new curriculum was provided for participants to discuss and review. The key issues discussed in relation to the curriculum were the school subjects, and whether the curriculum provides a balanced framework to meet the needs of the education system of the Maldives, the Maldivian context and the students.

Participants agreed that the subjects covered in the proposed National Curriculum covered a reasonable spectrum of areas; however, there were concerns as to whether the curriculum met the needs of young people and their future prospects. Participants argued that strict demarcations of subject areas into 'Arts', 'Business' and 'Science' streams should be made redundant. The reasons given for discontinuing 'streaming' was because of the common misconceptions attached to specific streams such as 'Arts' stream subjects being seen as easier subjects to score higher marks in and 'Science' stream subjects being seen as more relevant for brighter students. These misconceptions were argued to influence student's choice of subjects. Participants argued that there should be greater flexibility and variety of subjects for students to choose from so that their interests and future aspirations are best met.

The National Curriculum was also seen to have little relevance to the current socioeconomic context of the Maldives. Some participants argued that increased focus on spiritual education from the schools could deter young people from risky behaviour and that the national curriculum needs to be amended to include greater emphasis on improving spiritual education. It was mentioned that the current Islamic education focused more on the history of Islam instead of the practical aspects of Islam. Practical aspects such as prayers and Islamic *Ageedha* were argued as the key areas of spiritual education that needs to be strengthened and better reflected in the proposed national curriculum.

Participants also argued that education should be in touch with the changing socioeconomic and political landscape of the Maldives. Social science subjects such as Politics, Economics and Law were seen as subjects which could be better integrated into the curriculum, at the appropriate age. There was divided opinion whether Politics as a subject should be taught at schools due to the volatile political environment of the country and questions over whether political discussion of any sort should take place in school

environments. However, participants agreed that it was important for young people to learn that Politics is not always controversial or 'dirty' and to teach young people the values of good governance, types of governments, human rights and the use of collective action.

Participants emphasised the importance of making subject content age appropriate, whether it is religion, politics or law, and the need for greater emphasis on social science subjects given the current dynamics of the Maldives.

Another point of heavy debate amongst participants was whether the current education system provides an open and free platform for students to debate and discuss societal issues and subjects relevant to Maldivian society. Some argued that students are given the freedom to question and discuss most age-appropriate subjects at schools, whilst others argued that discussion is very much chosen and restricted by teachers. Speaking in relation to the political divide in the Maldives, some participants argued that freedom of expression allows students to become more confrontational in schools, and can contribute to further conflict in the country. Religious debate was also one topic where participants disagreed. Whilst it was agreed that religious debate is useful at schools, participants disagreed whether religious debate should have set limitations especially given the fact students have open access to a plethora of religious information and debates on the internet.

The National Curriculum was also discussed in relation to students with special needs or disabilities. In the Maldives children with physical disabilities are supported, but with significant variations across the nation. It was seen that currently, there are no mechanisms established within the education sector to identify or address the needs of students with disabilities in terms of curriculum or resources. It was argued that even if parents provide evidence of disability, teachers are often unaware or untrained to deal with disability. Although a few Male'-based schools such as Imaadhudheen School provide specialised classes for children with autism and some teachers are currently receiving training in working with children with disabilities, overall there is much to be done to integrate students with special needs into the wider learning environment.

5.4 *Language in Education*

Discussion on the language of instruction used in schools was identified as an emotional topic for most Maldivians because, since the 1960s, the language of instruction in schools in the Maldives has been English; and also because of the conventional notions in the country that to be educated or intelligent one has to be fluent in English. Participants, including teachers, students and MoE officials agreed that it is almost impossible to teach younger children, especially students from pre-school level to grade 3 entirely in the English Language; and the use of Dhivehi by teachers in classrooms in English medium subjects is common. Yet, English medium schools continue to enforce and require teachers and students to communicate in the English Language during all classes except during Islam and Dhivehi subjects. This discrepancy between what is practised and what is formally imposed by the MoE was heavily discussed amongst the participants.

Participants argued that it is no longer feasible to impose English Language as the primary language of instruction in Maldivian schools because in reality Dhivehi language is widely used to communicate in classrooms. Some teachers noted that in order to ensure their students understand lessons, teachers are often required to explain concepts in Dhivehi but in discretion. It was also argued that using Dhivehi language in schools was not only an important part of upholding Maldivian identity and culture, but is essential during the formative stages in a child's intellectual growth. The use of Dhivehi was seen by participants as integral in order to allow students to grasp concepts, express themselves and habituate in a learning environment, particularly in the case of younger children. It can be argued that this view has implications for the use of expatriate teachers in primary schools (see below, p.27 above). A question arises then about the proportion of pupils not receiving such Dhivehi language support because they are taught by teachers who do not speak the Dhivehi. In addition, this point needs to be considered by primary school curriculum developers and developers of local teacher training programmes. Training programmes may have to consider what linguistic (both Dhivehi and English) skills are required by future teachers if primary education is to continue in English with Dhivehi language support.

Some participants, particularly parents amongst the allocated discussion group, presented arguments in support of the use of the English Language as the language of instruction in schools. Their argument was that whilst the use of Dhivehi Language is inevitable in many circumstances, Maldivian students eventually prepare to undertake GSCE examinations and/or A-level examinations both of which are in English Language. In addition, it was argued that the use of the English Language from the early stages builds students' confidence in using English Language, particularly in Maldivian work environments where the use of English Language is commonplace. Fluency in English Language as result of studying in English medium has also proved to be an advantage for Maldivian students when they apply for studies abroad.

Despite the varied views expressed on the type of language of instruction in schools in the Maldives, participants concluded that there was not a strong enough case to use Dhivehi as the only language of instruction in schools. The table (Table 1) below was presented by participants, suggesting Dhivehi to be the language of instruction at pre-school to early primary school level and mixed medium of instruction from grade 4-5. From grade 7-12 participants preferred English as the language of instruction with foreign language options introduced from grade 9 and above.

Table 1: *Languages of Instruction in Schools*

Stage	Language of instruction
Foundation (UKG, LKG)	Dhivehi
Key Stage 1 (Grade 1, 2 and 3)	Dhivehi
Key Stage 2 (Grade 4, 5 and 6)	Mixed medium with English as the language of instruction for selected subjects and Dhivehi as the language of instruction for selected subjects
Key Stage 3 (Grade 7 and 8)	English
Key Stage 4 (Grade 9 and 10)	English as the language of instruction with option to study foreign languages
Key Stage 5 (Grade 11 and 12)	English as the language of instruction with the option to study foreign languages

On the subject of teaching foreign languages in the Maldives, participants were of the view that providing the option to choose foreign languages at secondary school level would prove to be beneficial for students. The foreign languages offered should reflect the changing labour market and be relevant to the demands of the tourism sector in the Maldives. For example, with the increase in tourists from China, Cantonese or Mandarin could be offered at secondary or postsecondary level. All participants agreed that introducing a foreign language in addition to English Language at an early age (preschool or primary) might hinder successful learning of English Language and/or Dhivehi, especially given the ongoing concerns related to inconsistent use of language of instruction in schools. Hence, the argument that foreign language option should be provided at secondary level of education or higher. Participants did not discuss what languages (e.g. regional languages in South Asia or tourism-related languages) could be offered in the curriculum. A question then arises regarding making decisions about the set of foreign languages to be made available in the curriculum.

5.5 Governance and Management of Schools and Colleges

The final discussion topic of the forum was aimed at understanding stakeholder views on the governance and management of schools and colleges in the Maldives. This discussion primarily focused on the role of school boards as an instrument through which multiple stakeholders can contribute to the decision making process of school policies.

Participants agreed that school boards, though functional, are ineffective in creating equal opportunities for teachers, students and parents to contribute to the decision making process. A number of reasons were identified and discussed for the school boards' ineffectiveness. Firstly, school boards impartiality and transparency were often questionable. Participants argued that school boards have become political and in many instances, school boards have acted beyond their mandate to implement personal agendas of board members. Secondly, participants argued that school boards are often dominated by a few individuals. Students were particularly underrepresented and unheard in school boards as reflected by a student participant. Thirdly, it was noted that currently school boards are unregulated and lack guidelines or structure for their mandate and role in school establishments. The lack of guidelines is believed to create conflict between school managers and the school board, and allows school boards to work outside their mandate.

Participants also highlighted the need to make school boards a better avenue for parents, teachers and students to communicate and collaborate on solving school issues in an open environment, and the importance of school boards to act as a channel to feed information, ideas and concerns from school level stakeholders to the policy makers at the MoE. The suggestions given to improving school boards include creating strict guidelines to ensure equal participation and representation of all school stakeholder groups.

It appears that the participants support stakeholder involvement in governance (p.30), and also World Bank. However, the simple existence of school boards neither leads to the benefits of school-based governance nor does it ensure local community involvement. Not all participants appear to be aware of the existing regulations on school board composition. This suggests there is a need for research to verify the public's awareness of existing school governance systems and perhaps monitor the implementation of the regulations. In addition, the possibility of including students in secondary school boards may need to be explored. At the same time, governance training of school managers, board members and local empowerment programmes (p.30, above) as suggested by World Bank (2012) may need to complement successful implementation of school board systems. This may help to minimise friction between board members and school managers described by some forum participants.

5.6 Further and higher education and training

As part of final topic, some of the discussions covered tertiary education and training opportunities in the Maldives. There was divided opinion amongst participants as to whether Maldivian further and higher education and training opportunities are able to compete with overseas offers in terms of quality and value for money. Whilst some argued that that higher education and training opportunities in the Maldives do not compete with overseas offers by any standards, some argued that some of the courses offered by the Maldives National University (MNU) are on a par with similar courses offered in the South Asia.

The general view about the scope of higher education and training opportunities in the Maldives was that it is limited. Participants noted that courses available are often related to business, IT and teaching, with limited opportunities for higher education or training beyond these fields of studies. It was noted that despite the increase in private education and training providers, there is still limited opportunities for training in non-government funded sectors such as construction. The focus on academic education rather than skills training and vocational training by both the private and public education providers was noted as one of the key reasons why tertiary education and training opportunities are limited in scope in the Maldives.

Recognising that MNU is still a developing institution facing a number of challenges, participants were positive on MNU's future prospects and scope in developing higher education opportunities in the Maldives. However, younger participants (including MNU students) noted that currently the MNU functions as a university by name only without the basic provisions expected from a university such as library resources, qualified lecturers and other student services. As suggested by Shareef's study (2005), students' views, as direct benefactors of education, provide useful information about quality of services (see above, p.28). It may be necessary to conduct in-depth and nationwide research into learner views and experiences to identify positives and shortcomings in the quality of lecturers and resources in Maldivian tertiary education provision.

As part of the discussion participants also discussed the barriers against making Maldivian higher education and training the best option for Maldives learners, parents and employers, and what follows is a brief overview of the identified barriers.

- *Barrier 1 – Lack of funds to pursue higher education and training in the Maldives.* Students are unable to obtain subsidised loans and the current loans offered are limited. It is worthwhile noting that there has been decreasing public investment in the Maldives (see p.27 for description of World Bank (2012) research). If further student-focused research shows a shortage of higher education study funds, there may be a need to reverse the trend of decreasing public expenditure on education.
- *Barrier 2 – Lack of flexibility and variety of courses offered by education providers.* MNU focuses on government funded training areas.
- *Barrier 3 - Lack of student resources and qualified trainers/lecturers.* Text books and reference material are limited to non-existing in some islands. Lecturers are often qualified with just an undergraduate or postgraduate degree without any teacher training or previous experience in teaching.
- *Barrier 4 – Study environment.* Most students have limited study space at home and at the learning institution.
- *Barrier 5 – Lack of standard setting.* No independent regulatory body or standards in place to assure the quality of courses and standard of delivery at higher levels, which is needed to add confidence to the system and ensure the higher education qualification achieved through MNU are accepted internationally. It should be noted as discussed earlier, that MQA (see p.29) does have a mandate to carry out a quality regulation function, even though the forum participants observed that much work is needed in this area.

In addition to the barriers identified by the forum participants, a further barrier may be in the form of poor secondary school results identified earlier (p.26). Unsatisfactory school results may mean school leavers do not have the academic aptitude to pursue further and higher education. It is worthwhile investigating in the future if these barriers are responsible for the sharp increase in dropouts in Maldives tertiary education described in Section 2 (p.26-27).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

The Education Forum was designed to provide an open platform for discussion for all education related stakeholder groups in the Maldives, including representatives from across the country. The forum aimed to discuss and identify the challenges within the education sector in the Maldives. Based on the discussions, this report recommends the following:

6.1 Education and Skills Development

- Research should be undertaken to develop a framework for skills development and career pathways within the Maldivian context. This research should develop a skills strategy for the Maldives.
- Career guidance should be provided to students from secondary level in order to inspire students and allow them to explore the different career paths available after secondary education.
- Apprenticeship programmes or work-based exercises should be integrated as part of the learning experience in schools.
- Parents and teachers should work together to develop students' work ethic and soft skills, both at home and at school.

6.2 Quality control

- A review of the quality control institutions and mechanisms within the current education system should be undertaken to identify the gaps within the system and take appropriate action.
- The current quality control bodies, ESQID and MQA, should be given full autonomy in order to set regulations and standards independent from the MoE.
- Minimum standards should be set and implemented in recruiting teachers and lecturers and teacher reviews should be undertaken periodically to assess teaching standards.
- MQA processes and regulations should be standardised, transparent and accessible.
- Maldives National Qualification Framework should be reviewed in order to ensure it is clear and fit for purpose.

6.3 School Curriculum

- The content of the national curriculum should be subject to periodic review to keep it relevant to the changing socioeconomic landscape of the Maldives.
- Mechanisms to regularly review and streamline the national curriculum should be established or updated.
- The national curriculum should be more inclusive whereby all student needs, including those of children with special needs, are taken into account in the planning, implementation and reviewing of the national curriculum.

6.4 Language in Education

- Further research should be conducted to identify the extent to which primary school education pupils receive Dhivehi language support whilst studying English medium subjects and to find out the implication of some students not receiving such support because they are taught by expatriates.
- Teacher training programmes should be designed to address issues related to mixed language usage in schools. Training programmes may also need to consider what linguistic (both Dhivehi and English) skills are required by future primary school teachers.
- Relevant organisations (tourism, trade authorities and private bodies, etc.) should provide guidance to educational institutions as to what foreign languages are most relevant to the Maldivian socioeconomic contexts.

6.5 Governance and management

- Research should be conducted to verify the public's awareness of existing school governance systems and regulations.
- The implementation of the school board regulations should be monitored.
- The possibility of including students in secondary school boards should be considered.
- Governance training to school managers, board members and local empowerment programmes should be provided (see p.30).

6.7 Higher education and training

- Government and private higher education providers should actively seek to work together to set standards and share knowledge in cross-cutting areas.
- The scope of courses offered by MNU should be broadened to include courses related to the needs of employers and industry.
- MNU and other education providers should explore and lobby for financial support opportunities for students to seek higher education and training.
- MNU should actively seek to build relationships with overseas institutions.
- Student support including study space, library resources and student services should be reviewed and further developed in order to ensure that students receive a well-rounded university experience.
- The decreasing public sector investment in education should be reversed. The Maldives achieved successful literacy rates and primary school education completion rates possibly due to the relatively high investment in primary education between 2003 and 2009. What is needed is a similar increase in overall education expenditure as a percentage of GDP, particularly investment in higher education. An increased overall education budget will increase the quality of secondary education and address the lower secondary school attainment rates. In addition, it will support the expansion of the tertiary education sector in order to meet the needs of the socioeconomic realities and address the disparity in quality of education (see discussion on education quality p.32) between Male' and other atolls.

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