

Dilrukshi Kurukulasuriya on Reorienting Education for Jobs Here and Abroad

BRIDGING THE HIGHER-VOCATIONAL EDUCATION GAP AND
MAKING EDUCATION WORK FOR EVERYONE

▶ The world of work is undergoing rapid change. As automation and artificial intelligence rapidly take over repetitive tasks, demand has grown for workers who bring problem-solving skills, adaptability, and digital literacy. Employers now focus less on formal degrees and more on what people can do, and these changes are not limited to the global North; they are also becoming evident in Sri Lanka, where outdated education-to-employment pathways are no longer sufficient.

According to Dilrukshi Kurukulasuriya, Executive Director and CHRO of DIMO, who also leads the education arm of the group, work arrangements have also undergone transformation. Remote and hybrid models have become standard in many sectors, reflecting a shift in expectations around flexibility. At the same time, growing attention to environmental sustainability has created new employment categories, such as green jobs, which require specialized knowledge in clean energy, conservation, and related fields. Sri Lanka is experiencing similar trends but with distinct challenges.

University graduates often struggle to find jobs that align with their academic

training. This has contributed to high youth unemployment and an outflow of talent seeking work abroad. However, growth in IT, business process outsourcing, and gig work have created new opportunities, especially for digitally literate individuals.

"We're also seeing more women entering leadership and technical roles, which is great progress. But the bottom line is that if you want to stay competitive, whether globally or locally, you need to keep learning, stay adaptable, and develop both your technical and soft skills," she said.

BRIDGING GAPS

Education policy in Sri Lanka must reflect these labour market shifts. The current system prioritizes examinations and textbook knowledge over the development of practical skills. There is an insufficient integration of soft skills, technology, and applied problem-solving, which are now essential in most professions.

From school through university, learning remains largely theoretical. Students have few opportunities to engage in project-based learning or industry exposure. These gaps affect not only employability but also readiness to navigate dynamic work environments. Kurukulasuriya

believes that addressing this gap requires treating all forms of education with equal seriousness and importance. She emphasizes the need to ensure people can keep learning throughout their lives, as rapidly changing jobs and skills require adults to easily update their knowledge through short courses, online learning, or workplace training. "Everyone, regardless of where they live or what their background is, deserves access to education that leads to real opportunities. That's the only way we can build a future-ready workforce and reduce inequality in the country," Kurukulasuriya said.

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

The prevailing mindset that university education is superior remains a barrier. Many parents and society still see vocational education as a fallback for those who do not qualify for university. This stigma persists even as the labour market shows a high demand for certified technicians, mechanics, and skilled tradespeople.

Kurukulasuriya argues that these deserve respect. "Sri Lanka can strike the right balance by offering more flexible learning paths, encouraging respect for all careers, and ensuring that vocational and higher education work together, not separately," she said.

At DIMO, both streams are valued. The DIMO Academy for Technical Skills (DATS) provides training in areas such as automobile mechatronics and building management technology, while DIMO's partnerships with universities support internships and further studies, aligning academic training with industry expectations. What matters most is that individuals are not boxed in—they are given the freedom to grow, whether they begin with a degree or with technical training.

Kurukulasuriya sees great value in creating flexibility between academic and vocational pathways. This vision aligns closely with DIMO's commitment to 'fueling the dreams and aspirations of the communities it serves', as the company



Dilrukshi Kurukulasuriya
Executive Director of DIMO

actively supports education as a means of empowerment.

"What makes our approach work is that we don't limit people based on how they started. We've seen many technicians go on to become managers, and graduates take up technical roles to gain practical experience. We believe in creating opportunities for everyone, and we back that belief with action," she said.

CHOICE, COLLABORATION, AND CAREER READINESS

Her vision includes an education system that allows for crossovers. Workers who

begin with vocational training should have the option to pursue higher education, while university students should be able to acquire technical skills during their academic journey. Creating such permeability can improve both employment outcomes and workforce adaptability.

Businesses, she argues, must take responsibility for shaping education policy. Employers should not only wait for qualified applicants but also invest in training and curriculum development to enhance their workforce. Internships, mentorship, and close engagement with educational institutions can improve the

alignment between learning and labour market needs.

"We also believe the private sector has a big role to play. We can't just wait for qualified people to show up; we need to help train, guide, and mentor them. That's why we're so involved in shaping curricula, offering internships, and investing in skills development," she said.

This requires sustained collaboration. Government agencies, education providers, employers, and individuals must collectively reform the way education is delivered and how it translates into employment. Without this alignment, mismatches between skills and job opportunities will persist, holding back economic growth and social mobility.

Kurukulasuriya's vision is rooted in long-term equity and practicality. She advocates for a system that allows students to access either academic or vocational pathways based on their interests and strengths. The focus, she argues, should be on enabling choice, mobility, and relevance, regardless of where one starts.

With organizations like DIMO modelling this approach, change is already underway. Educational partnerships, inclusive training programmes, and practical exposure are becoming part of a broader strategy to prepare Sri Lanka's workforce for emerging global realities. In this context, the distinction between academic and vocational education becomes less important than ensuring that both are respected, accessible, and tied to actual employment opportunities.

"If we all work together, government, educators, companies, and individuals, I believe we can create an education system that gives everyone the chance to succeed. And at DIMO, we're proud to be part of that journey," Kurukulasuriya said. ●