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*"Transformation for Empowerment: Moving beyond Buzzwords"*

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences  
University of Sri Jayewardenepura  
Sri Lanka



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## History of accounting education in Sri Lanka: Time of ancient kingdoms to British rule

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Presently, Sri Lanka is considered as a gem for finance and accounting outsourcing mainly due to its vibrant pool of accountants, who stand amongst one of the world's highest per capita. The country's accounting education system plays a pivotal role in producing these professionals. It is, therefore, interesting to see the development of the accounting education system in the country. Hence, this paper investigates the history of accounting education in Sri Lanka from the time of its ancient kingdoms (from 543 BC to 1815) and subsequently to the British rule (1796 – 1948). The archival method was used for collecting data. The main data sources included various documents that provided material and discussions about the education systems of the ancient Sri Lanka (such as institutional and author publications, sessional papers, administration reports and journal articles), several other historical records that provided corroborative evidence [such as *Mahavansa*, *Atuwa Grantha* (e.g. *Sammohavinodani Atuwawa*), *Sandeshu Kawya* (e.g. *Gira Sandeshaya*), *Saddharmarathnawaliya*], and the translations of inscriptions.

Despite the indications of the existence of accountancy education before the introduction of Buddhism to the country, the evidence available to the provision of education in general, the accounting education in particular, is very limited. After the establishment of Buddhism in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC, there are some evidences of accounting practice and accounting education in the country. Accountancy had been one of the secular subjects, which had been taught in Pirivenas to prepare lay students for a profession or occupation. Existence of persons responsible for accounting in the royal palace or treasury known as *Ganaka* and *Poththakin* [පොත් පොත්කරුන්] provides the evidence of inclusion of accountancy as a subject area in the higher education for laymen. It can also be identified that the (accounting) education system of this period has been influenced by the ancient Indian treatise, Kautilya's Arthashastra. However, this indigenous system of education prevalent in the ancient kingdoms diminished with the foreign occupation of the country. During the colonial periods, especially during the British rule, an administrative and operational framework for the plantation companies was established. This, in turn, created a demand for public practice in accounting, auditing, and taxation by the Sri Lankan business organizations. Accounting related professional and technical courses (e.g. book keeping) had been emerged to cater the job market requirements. In addition, accounting/book keeping was formally introduced to the school curriculum during the latter part of the British era. Even today, the accounting education system evolved in the British period, still continues with some subsequent reforms made in the post-independence era. Hence, the present system of accounting education in Sri Lanka has its main roots linked to the British rule in the country.

**Keywords:** *Accountants, Accounting education, British rule, Buddhist education, History of education, Sri Lanka.*