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# Education In Maldives

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## Introduction

The Maldives, an archipelago nation renowned for its pristine turquoise waters and idyllic coral islands, possesses a story far richer than its postcard-perfect facade suggests. Beyond the allure of its natural beauty lies a vibrant society continually striving for progress, with education standing as a cornerstone of its national development and cultural preservation. This book, *Education In Maldives: A Comprehensive Overview from Early Childhood to Higher Education*, embarks on a detailed exploration of this crucial sector, unraveling the intricate tapestry of learning that shapes the lives of its citizens and propels the nation forward.

This comprehensive overview delves into the unique challenges and triumphs of establishing and evolving an educational system within a geographically dispersed island nation. From the foundational quranic schools of yesteryear to the modern institutions embracing digital learning, the journey of Maldivian education is one of remarkable adaptation and unwavering commitment. We will examine how a nation with a rich Islamic heritage and a distinct language, Dhivehi, navigates the complexities of a globalized world while safeguarding its cultural identity through its educational frameworks. The book aims to provide a holistic understanding, tracing the trajectory of education from its nascent stages to its present-day manifestations across all levels.

The scope of this book is intentionally broad, reflecting the multifaceted nature of education in the Maldives. We begin by tracing the historical evolution of schooling, understanding the pivotal moments and influences that have shaped its current form. Subsequent chapters meticulously dissect the structure and governance of the Maldivian educational system, offering insights into the policies and frameworks that underpin its operation. From the critical early years of childhood education to the specialized pathways offered in primary and secondary schooling, and further into the technical, vocational, and higher education landscapes, each stage is examined with depth and precision.

Beyond the structural elements, this volume also explores the vital human components and cross-cutting themes that define Maldivian education. Dedicated sections address the pivotal role of teacher education, curriculum development, assessment systems, and the imperative of inclusive education for all learners, including those with special needs. Furthermore, we investigate the transformative impact of information and communication technology, the critical interplay of Dhivehi and English as languages of instruction, and the profound influence of Islam on educational philosophy and practice. The book also sheds light on crucial aspects such as policy, funding, international collaborations, and the evolving challenges and

opportunities that characterize the Maldivian educational landscape.

Ultimately, *Education In Maldives* serves as an invaluable resource for educators, policymakers, researchers, and anyone with a vested interest in understanding the dynamics of education in small island developing states. It offers a nuanced perspective on how a nation strives for excellence and equity in education, preparing its youth to navigate the complexities of the 21st century while upholding its unique cultural heritage. Through this detailed examination, readers will gain profound insights into the resilience, innovation, and aspirations that define the Maldivian educational journey, ultimately contributing to a richer appreciation of this remarkable nation's commitment to learning and progress.

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## **CHAPTER ONE: The Roots of Learning - Traditional and Early Islamic Education**

The history of education in the Maldives is as ancient and layered as its coral reefs, stretching back through centuries of informal learning to the structured systems that emerged with the advent of Islam. Before the modern school bell ever chimed on these scattered islands, knowledge was passed down through generations, deeply interwoven with cultural practices and religious tenets. This early educational landscape, shaped by the unique geography of the archipelago and its profound spiritual heritage, laid the foundational stones for what would eventually become a formalized national system.

### **The Kiyavaage and Edhuruge: Cornerstones of Early Learning**

For centuries, the primary hubs of learning in the Maldives were informal settings known as "Kiyavaage" or "Edhuruge". These traditional schools, often operating out of a single large room in a home or even under the shade of a benevolent tree, were where children first encountered the world of letters and numbers. From as young as three years old, children, both boys and girls, would gather to learn the essentials: basic arithmetic, the Dhivehi language, and the fundamental elements of Arabic. The curriculum was largely religious, with a significant emphasis on the recitation of the Holy Quran and the absorption of basic Islamic knowledge. These institutions instilled a strong culture of literacy and religious understanding, which formed the bedrock of Maldivian society.

The Kiyavaage system, usually run by a local imam or a respected elder, ensured that even the most remote islands had access to this foundational education. The teachers, often community-paid without formal training, played a crucial role in disseminating literacy and religious instruction. A significant milestone for students in this system was the "khatam," the completion of reciting the entire Quran, an event often celebrated with much fanfare by the entire community. While these traditional schools didn't delve into modern subjects like science or advanced mathematics, they were instrumental in preserving Maldivian cultural identity and fostering a deep connection to Islamic heritage. Even today, the legacy of the Kiyavaage persists, with many children attending Quran classes alongside their regular schooling.

### **The Arrival of Islam and its Educational Impact**

The official conversion of the Maldives to Islam in 1153 AD marked a profound turning point in the nation's history, irrevocably shaping its social, cultural, and educational landscape. Unlike the preceding Buddhist era, Islam mandated reading and writing the

Quran for all, necessitating the establishment of more structured seminaries and schools. The Maldivian language, Dhivehi, itself an Indo-Aryan language closely related to Sinhalese, adopted the Thaana script, which is written from right to left, similar to Arabic, following this conversion. This linguistic shift further integrated Islamic learning into the fabric of Maldivian education.

The early educational practices in the Maldives, therefore, were intrinsically linked to religious teachings and the development of literacy in both Dhivehi and Arabic. Mosques became central to this educational endeavor, offering Quran classes that were often more universal than even formal school Islamic studies, with attendance beginning as early as age five. The mosque *Muallim* (teacher) frequently served as a child's first Islamic instructor, providing intensive practice and individual attention for Quranic recitation. This dual-track model, combining school curricula with community mosque education, remains a defining characteristic of Maldivian Islamic education today.

As the traditional informal settings evolved, they gradually transitioned into "Madhrasas," which, while still holding Quranic studies at their core, began to introduce a broader range of subjects. However, education at this stage was not yet universally accessible or compulsory. These madrasas, larger in scale than the makthabs, offered a more extensive curriculum and catered to a greater number of students and teachers. The emphasis remained firmly on religious instruction, reflecting the nation's 100% Muslim identity and the constitutional requirement for all Maldivian citizens to be Muslim. This unique context has led to a highly centralized Islamic education system, integrated into the national framework under direct government oversight.

## **The Dawn of Formal Schooling and British Influence**

The early 20th century ushered in a new era for Maldivian education with the establishment of the first formal government schools. This pivotal shift was significantly influenced by the British presence in the region, which introduced Western-style, English-medium schooling. Prior to this, government intervention in education was minimal, with records showing a public government 'school' established near the Friday Mosque around 1659, though its longevity is unclear. By 1882, there were a few government-supported 'edhuruge' in Malé, providing religious knowledge and literacy.

The first truly formal school in the Maldives was Majeediyya School, founded in Malé on April 19, 1927, by Sultan Muhammad Shamsuddeen III. Initially named Madharusathul Salahiyya, it began with 69 students and, after a relocation in 1928, was renamed Madhrasathul Saniyyathul Hukoomathul Mahaldheebiyya, often referred to as Madhrasathul Saniyya. While today Majeediyya School is primarily for boys, it was originally co-educational. However, by 1944, the need for a separate girls' school

became apparent, leading to the establishment of Aminiya School. This marked a crucial step towards gender balance in formal education. These early formal schools taught Dhivehi, Arabic, Islam, and arithmetic, a curriculum considered sufficient for the nascent stages of organized schooling.

During the 1940s, a concerted government campaign aimed to extend formal schooling to as many inhabited islands as possible. These efforts were met with enthusiasm from islanders, who often contributed resources like daily fish catches to support the new schools. Simple one-room structures, built from coral and lime with thatched roofs, became the makthabs of the era, taking on the functions of the traditional edhuruge while also offering a basic curriculum in reading and writing. The medium of instruction in these emerging modern schools was initially Dhivehi, alongside the continued focus on Islamic education.

## **Post-Independence and the Drive for Modernization**

Following the Maldives' independence in 1965, and its transformation from a Sultanate to a Republic in 1968, the pace of educational reform accelerated dramatically. Sri Lanka, a neighboring nation, played a supportive role in this transition, assisting the Maldives in establishing a modern education system that incorporated English as a medium of instruction. Indeed, the 1960s saw a significant shift in curriculum, with English becoming the medium of instruction in government schools in Malé, and the curriculum being reorganized to align with the imported London General Certificate of Education (GCE). This move reflected a growing desire to meet international standards and prepare Maldivian youth for a globalized world.

A critical development occurred in 1976 when, based on a UNESCO study, the Maldivian government launched the Educational Development Project. This comprehensive initiative focused on expanding primary education, training teachers, developing curricula, and establishing educational radio and community education programs for adults. The first schools under this project opened in 1978 in Baa Atoll Eydhafushi, followed by others in N. Manadhoo and HDh. Kulhudhuffushi in 1979. School construction continued across all atolls, often supported by projects funded by Japan. This period also saw the centralization of the schooling system by the Ministry of Education in 1980, leading to the introduction of the first national primary school curriculum, which formalized English as the medium of instruction in all public primary schools. This curriculum was further revised in 1984, introducing national curricula for middle and primary schools, while secondary schools adopted the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) subject-specific syllabi. These reforms marked a definitive move towards a more structured, standardized, and nationally unified education system, though traditional and modern schools continued to exist side-by-side, reflecting the ongoing evolution of learning in the Maldives.

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