

Finding a Way Forward amidst the Contemporary Challenges to Sri Lankan Student Politics

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Introduction

Student activism has marked some crucial milestones in the political history of Sri Lanka as it “... has always reflected the social and political changes in the country” (Samaranayake, 2015, p. 23). This close connection between universities and social change is a common phenomenon in similar country contexts because “universities do not function in a vacuum, and they are especially related to and dependent on their societies in the Third World” (Altbach, 1984, p. 637). Thus, student activism in Sri Lanka can be studied in relation to contemporary social and political events, as students’ political engagement has reflected these throughout history. This chapter focuses on student activism in Sri Lanka. First, the chapter looks into the historical background of student activism while examining its impact on the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. Then, the chapter examines the challenge ahead of Sri Lankan student activists in maintaining their traditional contentious politics and methods of political mobilization. The chapter draws on LOC-SIHEG 2021_Sri Lanka survey data gathered from local student unions in state universities in Sri Lanka and interviews with university leaders. In conclusion, the author proposes a new model for student activism in Sri Lanka.

The evolution of student politics in Sri Lanka is central to state universities in Sri Lanka. State universities are fewer compared to private higher education institutions yet vibrant places for student politics. “The Ministry of Higher education and the University Grant Commission exists as the main policymaking bodies regarding the state university system ... ” (Kumari and Ferando, 2021, p. 86) in Sri Lanka. However, in terms of private higher education institutions, “Ministry of Higher Education and University Grants Commission do not have purview over these institutions. Further, these private higher education institutions have never received the status of the state universities and not referred to as universities in the country” (Wickramasinghe, 2018, p. 10). Thus, whenever someone refers to “university student activism” in Sri Lanka, it has always been the state universities. Also, an act of Parliament has legitimized university student unions and faculty student unions in state universities to act as the official representative of the student community in their respective institutions. Thus, these student unions are mandated to work in consultation with their institutions’ governing bodies in enhancing student experience. However,

the student movement of Sri Lanka is led by Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF) which does not have any legal mandate as such even though IUSF's membership is composed of local student unions from state-owned higher education institutions. By mobilizing its membership, IUSF mostly intervenes with policy decisions at national level, whereas university student unions and faculty student unions are mostly active at institutional level.

The reasons for more political activism at state universities are several (cf. Klemenčič 2014, 2024a, b). Unlike students in state universities, students in private higher education institutions do not have a national-level representation to collectively engage in national politics. Furthermore, securing a place in a state university is a highly competitive process because “increasing the number of students [intake] to the universities is limited and the main reason for this is the scarcity of resources in the universities” (Tharmaseelan, 2007, p. 183). Even though the successful completion of General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level examination determines the eligible students for university admissions, out of those students “... just about 15 percent are selected to the state universities of Sri Lanka leaving the rest of the people (85 percent) losing their dream to enter state university education” (Alawattegama, 2020, p. 9). So, state universities are populated by highly competent students, many from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who are committed to free education and study for free. Such university context tends to be especially conducive to student activism.

Student activism in Sri Lanka is deeply connected to the free education system of the country which provides education from primary level to higher education. As suggested by Alawattegama (2020, p. 5), “the introduction of free education policy in 1944 was a paradigm shift in the history of the education system in Sri Lanka” because Free Education Policy (1945) paved the path to an environment which makes educational attainment available for everyone despite their socioeconomic background. “October 1945, the Free Education Policy came into effect; stating that every child above the age of 5 and not more than 16 is entitled to free education” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs-Sri Lanka, n.d.). It could be observed that preserving the Free Education Policy (1945) has become part and parcel of student politics because “a key mobilizing factor is the issue of free education and opening up tertiary education to the private sector” (Samaranayake, 2015, p. 29). According to Kumari and Fernando (2021), this demand for social justice through free access to education from state university students can be explained by looking at the socioeconomic composition of the student population at these universities. Namely, “the majority of [students at state universities] are from rural lower—or middle-income families who have experienced numerous hardships in life” (Kumari and Fernando, 2021, p. 86). This may also be the reason why leftist political parties heavily influence the student movement in Sri Lanka because the student demands are more aligned with leftist political ideologies.

The introduction of the Free Education Policy (1945) could be considered as a groundbreaking political decision but still “there is a visible disparity across regions in educational attainment or students' performance, with regard to facilities, quality of education, teachers, etc.” (Liyanage, 2014, p. 122). As discussed earlier, selection to state universities is highly competitive with only about 15 percent of students who successfully completed the General Certificate of Education (GCE) Advanced Level securing a place. Access to free higher education is thus severely limited and one of the major grievances mobilizing students to activism demanding more education facilities to accommodate students who wish to pursue higher education in Sri Lanka. At the same time, “the concept of private universities has been severely criticized and

opposed by the students' movement and some of the social pressure groups (Alawattegama, 2020, pp. 9–10). The main reasons behind state university students' objection to private higher education can be identified as twofold. First, private higher education is considered as a way of widening the prevailing social and economic disparities in Sri Lanka. Second, private higher education is associated with the risk of declining the quality of education. According to Doss (2017) doors can be shut for the lower classes of society if education is reduced into a commodity which would only be available to the economically privileged ones. Using arguments which were raised around state university students' protests against the private medical university which was called South Asian Institute of Technology and Medicine (SAITM), he further explains how the quality of education could be dropped if "the providers of education driven by motives of profit would invariably supply the cheapest of resources and expect the maximum of profit; which in reality would mean lowest quality education in anticipation of the maximum profit margin" (Doss, 2017).

Historical Background of Student Activism in Sri Lanka

The history of student unions in Sri Lanka runs back to the nineteenth century as the Sri Lanka Law Student Union (LSU), the main student body of Sri Lanka Law College, is seen as the oldest student union in the country, having been established in 1894 (The Law Students' Union of Sri Lanka, 1998). LSU's scope has been limited to the internal matters of the institution and law student community. According to Samaranyake (2015, p. 23), "Sri Lanka did not have a single student movement until 1960" (Samaranyake, 2015, p. 23). Weeramunda's (2008) timeline of conflicts in universities from 1953 to 1993 reports a clash between the students from the University of Peradeniya (then known as University of Ceylon) and the police in 1953. According to Daily Mirror (2016), this incident took place in connection with the "*harthaal*" (a closure of shops) and protests organized by Marxist parties to oppose the economic policies of the government. This could be identified as the first notable intervention of university students on a national-level political issue even though they did not have a unified student movement at the time.

According to Samaranyake (2015), the increase in the number of universities led to growth in student unions which represented an important part of radical or leftist political parties. Consequently, "after 1971, university student politics became a part and parcel of insurrectionary violence and guerrilla warfare in Sri Lanka" (Samaranyake, 2015, p. 24). The connection between student politics and the political party called Janata Vimukti Peramuna (famously known as JVP), or People's Liberation Front can be considered as crucial in this regard. JVP led both youth insurrections in 1971 and 1988/9, utilizing its student wing called the "Socialist Student Union (SSU)." Being influenced by leftist ideologies, university students played a prominent role in both of these youth uprisings. The 1971 insurrection can be identified as a major landmark in the political history of Sri Lanka as well as in student politics because "... thousands of predominantly Sinhala-educated and rural-based youth, ostensibly belonging to the JVP ... attempted to overthrow the recently elected United Front government by capturing police stations throughout the island" (Hewage, 2020, p. 186). The government suppressed this youth uprising by declaring a state of emergency which was "... defined by disappearances, torture,

summary executions, and the detention of some eighteen thousand JVP suspects in prison camps” (Hewage, 2020, p. 186). Nevertheless, this uprising demonstrated the ability of JVP in mobilizing Sri Lankan youth, in particular university students. After this insurrection, JVP and SSU were banned under the emergency regulations but “the strategy of confrontational politics was resumed by the SSU once the JVP became a recognized political party after 1977” (Weeramunda, 2008, p. 34). Arguably, the SSU strategy was successful because “by 1979 the leadership of the students’ movement in universities was with the JVP” (People’s Liberation Front—JVP Sri Lanka, n.d.). The realization of their ability in mobilizing university students incentivized the JVP to take a similar approach during the youth uprising in 1989/9.

Wijesiriwardena (2011) explains how the government formed by the United National Party (UNP) published a “White Paper on Education” in 1981 that proposed school management committees in order to transfer the burden of seeking funds to run schools to the parents of school children. The resistance to this “White Paper on Education” mainly arose from university students. By 1981, Socialist Students Union of the JVP “was in power in most of the students’ councils in universities” (People’s Liberation Front—JVP Sri Lanka, n.d.). As suggested by Senevirathne (2002), students fought against the “White papers” even in a situation where the opposition of the parliament was not in a strong position to fight against the government. He also mentions that “the students scored a victory of sorts, I suppose, for the UNP was forced to withdraw the document and resort to surreptitious means of implementing its proposals” (Senevirathne, 2002, p. 11). Thus, it can be considered as a historically important event because students could reverse the decision of the government. This was another instance which shows the connection between student activism in Sri Lanka and its focus on preserving the “Free Education Policy.” As suggested by Senevirathne (2002, p. 11), “[t]he whole process was captured best by the slogan that was seized by our youth in the late eighties, *kolambata kiri apata kekiri*.” The Sinhala phrase means that people in urban areas get the best of everything whilst rural people get a secondary-level treatment. The slogan was used as a metaphor to express how students from rural parts of the country were disadvantaged, whilst the students from Colombo (the commercial capital of the country), who had privileged backgrounds, could be benefited from the proposed reforms.

It is not a secret that Sri Lankan student politics has always been under party political influence since the 1970s. However, “at the same time, attempts by the post 1977 government to counter the influence of leftist parties in student politics, particularly the JVP, by setting up a pro-government student organization only contributed to intensifying inter-student conflicts” (Weeramunda, 2008, p. 29). Being unable to avoid another youth uprising in 1988/9 indicates that the attempts to set up alternative student movements had not been successful. The insurrection in 1988/9 was led by the JVP based on the following three demands: “a rejection of the policy of economic liberalisation which had benefited some but not all of society, a rejection of the Indian presence; and a rejection of the use of political criteria for job allocation” (Little, 1997, p. 83). This youth uprising was suppressed by the government using military power with massive loss of life. The JVP had been considered as the political party which fuels the most prominent national-level university student movement in Sri Lanka, the “Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF),” famously known among the students as “Anthare.” According to JVP Sri Lanka (2016) the IUSF was operational under the guidance of JVP and the leadership of SSU, even during the struggle against “White paper on education” in the 1980s.

The student engagement in the initial stage of the thirty-year war between the Sri Lankan government forces and The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE)—a militant separatist group fighting for a homeland for Tamils in Sri Lanka—cannot be disregarded. Amarasingam (2013) explains how student movements such as Thamil Manavar Peravai or the Tamil Students Union (TSU) were formed in the 1970s in response to the new policies on university admission which were discriminatory to Tamil students. According to Sabaratnam (2003), TSU also operated as an armed group among many other militant groups during the early stage of the war. Thus, it is evident that student activism in North and Eastern provinces took a different shape from the South due to the prevailing armed conflict between the Sri Lankan armed forces and LTTE in those areas.

Inter-University Student Federation (IUSF)

IUSF is the largest student movement in Sri Lanka and it has been dominating the sphere of student politics for many years. “Although it is not a legal entity recognized by the University Act of 1978, it functions as a de facto student federation” (Samaranayake, 2015, p. 29). So, IUSF works as the central hub for local student councils which are established in state universities. Given that “... current student councils are highly politicized bodies and the universities are strong centers of youth led agitation” (Samaranayake, 2015, p. 23), it is not surprising to understand why IUSF, which is well known for its confrontational politics, still has a stronghold in state universities.

Examining the aspirations of IUSF, it could be observed that they are not confined only to issues on educational affairs or universities because:

when the Inter-University Students Federation began in 1978, there were three main organisation goals, ... The first is unconditionally standing up for the rights of the people of this country, the second is fighting for the right to free education, and the third is intervention in educational affairs and student welfare of universities. (Wasantha Mudalige, 2022, cited in Francisco, 2022)

According to Mudalige (2022) who is the former convener of IUSF, these aspirations remain the same for them. Thus, IUSF’s intervention in other national-level issues, which are experienced by the people of Sri Lanka, is not surprising given that it has been one of their organizational aspirations since the establishment of the organization. Also, it is important to note that the continuous struggle to preserve the right to free education is also reflected in above aspirations.

IUSF holds its weekly meetings with the participation of student leaders from state higher-education institutions. However, IUSF has only one leadership position which is called “the convener.” The convener of IUSF is usually appointed with mutual agreement of student leaders from local student unions. In case if there is a necessity to hold an election, every institution has one vote. IUSF forms the student movement in Sri Lanka by mobilizing the local student unions, predominantly in state universities. As an example, if there is a need to protest a political decision, local student unions are instructed by IUSF to organize small protests in their cities and universities. Depending on the intensity of the issue, sometimes students from different state universities are invited to join large-scale protests which are organized to be held at a central

location (most of the time, in the capital city). Often, the end of these protests is marked by a clash between students and police forces. It is not uncommon to see police forces using tear gas to disperse the student protests while making some arrests depending on the seriousness of the situation. The most recent example is the clashes between students and police forces, during the protests which demanded the former president of the country to resign due to his government's handling of the country's economy (*BBC News*, 2022b; *Daily Mirror*, 2022). It is also important to note that the former convener of IUSF, Wasantha Mudalige, was held in custody for over 150 days after being arrested with a group of other student activists during a protest in August 2022. The arrests were made under the provisions of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (PTA), a law that has faced criticism from numerous local and international human rights organizations for its draconian nature (Amnesty International, 2023; Farzan, 2023).

In spite of the ability to collectively engage, student activism in state universities is heavily criticized for the practice called "ragging" which senior students use to politically socialize and welcome new students. Though "political socialization is manifest when political feelings, values, beliefs, etc. are transmitted explicitly" (Bender, 1967), it is questionable whether "ragging" could realize such objective because it is usually defined as "the verbal, physical or psychological abuse that newly enrolled students undergo when entering universities in Sri Lanka" (Hulangamuwa, Lowchiong and Dharmakirti, 2021). It has become an embedded component in student activism in Sri Lanka because "the student political groups use ragging as a weapon to control the new students and to indoctrinate them" (Wimalasuriya, 2012). They also consider it as a crucial part of the student subculture in state universities. Weeramunda (2008)'s timeline of conflicts in universities shows that even in the 1960s, students had engaged in protests and demonstrations against the punishments given for ragging. Liyanage (2014) has also mentioned how the ragging group was mainly led by the political leadership of JVP. However, it is also important to note that "JVP has not been able to mobilize the youth over the last decade" (Gunaratnam, 2012, cited in Colombo Telegraph, 2012). Even though the political leadership of Sri Lankan student politics has now been shifted to the Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), still the abusive practice of "ragging" allegedly exists. Most importantly, it should be also noted that "milder ragging has its supporters as an equalizing ritual which seems to transcend ethnic divisions" (Haviland, 2012). Thus, it is not impossible to find a considerable portion of students, past students, and university staff who do not oppose "ragging" even though it is clearly declared as a punishable criminal offence under "Prohibition of ragging and other forms of violence in educational institutions act, no. 20 of 1998."

However, when it comes to student engagement with IUSF through local student unions, a clear division among students could be seen across many state universities because there is a considerable proportion of students in state universities who do not obey ragging groups. Eventually, these nonragging groups are not involved in student activities organized by IUSF or local student unions, and they are considered as the "Ala" group, using the first two letters of the Sinhala term "Athharina ladha" which means "abandoned." This informal division essentially determines the membership of IUSF at local university level because only the first-year "ragged" students are invited to partake in the activities conducted by the student unions. However, this connection between the political socialization process inspired by leftist ideologies and ragging culture could be considered as a barrier to reaching the fullest potential of the Sri Lankan student movement as it restricts the political engagement of a considerable number of students.

As it was mentioned above, “IUSF is allied politically” (Devapriya, 2022) with Frontline Socialist Party (FSP), which was formed in 2012 by a group of members who split off from JVP. FSP “... has been backing university student unions to find ground as powerful bodies within the university system” (Wickramasinghe, 2020). Thus, the FSP has a stronghold in state universities through IUSF replacing JVP who ruled the student movement in Sri Lanka for many years. Recently, IUSF has given leadership to university students and other civil actors in opposing the detrimental measures taken by recent governments, which aimed to commercialize education without a proper regulatory and quality assurance mechanism. Among those struggles, the fight against the SAITM could be identified as one of the most important milestones because “SAITM has been the centre of many controversies as students from state-run schools and doctors in government services have questioned its educational standards and medical facilities” (Rezwan, 2017).

Also, in 2021, IUSF played a key role in mobilizing state university students against the proposed “General Sir John Kotelawala National Defence University Bill” which posed a threat of militarization of higher education. Namely, “... the new Act excludes the Kotelawala University from the purview of the University Grants Commission (UGC), which is in charge of the administration of State universities in Sri Lanka” (Ariyaratne, 2021). In 2022, student activists also joined forces with mass citizen protests known as “Aragalaya” (meaning “struggle” in Sinhala), demanding the resignation of Sri Lanka’s former President, Gotabaya Rajapakshe. These revolutionary protests primarily targeted the President and his family members who held government positions, often referred to as the Rajapakshes because “he and his family have been blamed for a deep economic crisis, with Sri Lankans facing acute shortages of food, fuel and other basic supplies” (*BBC News*, 2022a). The significant role played by student activists in this critical juncture could be identified as remarkable. Most importantly, it could be observed that for the first time ever in history, these protests have united both state and private university students to a certain extent as they fought for a common cause along with other citizens.

Currently, each state university has a main student union as well as faculty student unions. Faculty student unions consist of students from respective faculties of a university. In comparison with main student unions, it could be observed that some of these faculty student unions are politically neutral as they only focus on faculty-specific student matters and organize student activities within the faculty. However, there are some faculty student unions which are politically active and they join hands with main student unions to politically respond in addressing student issues. Most importantly, there is a Parliament Act which legitimates student representation in state universities in Sri Lanka—Universities Act, No. 16 of 1978. The Act has established the University Grants Commission as the main regulatory body which governs Sri Lankan state universities. Part XIV and the schedule to Section 112 of the Act stipulate specific details regarding the establishment and functioning of university students unions and faculty students unions. The Act also states the duties and functions of the university student unions and faculty student unions.

Even though student activism in Sri Lanka is subjected to heavy criticisms by many parties for their confrontational politics and abusive practices such as “ragging,” the contribution of student activists to protecting the Free Education Policy from continuous challenges and threats is remarkable. In spite of the fact that “the cost of activism includes the incidents of deaths, injuries, custody, arrest, suspension of students; damaging public properties, and closure of universities”

(Kumari and Fernando, 2021, p. 86), student activists from state universities are inspired and politically socialized to fully commit to their cause even with their lives. Thus, the story of student activism in Sri Lanka, written with blood and tears, could be summed up in this famous quote by Rohana Wijeweera, the JVP leader who led the 1971 and 1988–9 youth uprisings: “We may be killed but our voice will never die” (1973, cited in Jeyaraj, 2014).

Student Representation at State Universities in Sri Lanka— Findings from a LOC-SIHEG Survey

With the aim of gathering primary data from the student unions at local (institutional) level, LOC-SIHEG 2021_Sri Lanka was shared with student leaders in Sri Lankan state universities. One representative from each student union filled the survey and the total number of five state university student unions who responded to the survey, which is more than 25 percent of the total number of state universities in Sri Lanka. Other private and state higher education institutions were not considered for the data collection as student activism in Sri Lanka is mainly spread across state universities. All the student leaders who filled the survey were registered undergraduates and held the office of “President” in their respective student union. Eighty percent of them were following a bachelor’s degree and in the ages between eighteen and twenty-four years. It should be also noted that the same percentage of respondents had answered the survey without the involvement of any other student officials.

Out of the five student unions which took part in the LOC-SIHEG 2021 survey, only one student union mentioned that they are not connected to the national-level student movement. All other student unions declared that they are part of the IUSF. These data indicate that Sri Lanka has a neo-corporative model of student activism with one central student body connecting other local student unions which are legitimate entities within their respective universities. According to the main Parliament Act on state universities, “the University Students Union of each Higher Educational Institution shall be representative of the entire student community of the Institution” (Schedule—Universities Act, No. 16 of 1978). Also, it was found that every student union has an office in a building given by their education institution for free.

In examining the membership of student unions, it was found that the student union membership does not comprise the total student population. According to four student unions, being a union member is voluntary whereas one student union mentioned that membership is automatically given to students when they are enrolled as students of that particular state university. Also, each student union had at least more than 70 percent of membership cadre out of their total student population. These numbers divulge the fact that there is a considerable portion of the student population who are not members of local student unions. These students could be mainly identified as anti-ragging groups in state universities.

Membership fees and revenue from student-led projects were the main source of income for the local student unions. Grants from the government and their universities were mentioned along with “street fundraising” which is famously known as “keta” (it is the Sinhalese word for tills). It is the prevailing state university subculture in which the first-year students are sent to the streets with tills. They have to reach out to the general public on streets and public transport, asking

for small donations to fill their tills. It was also found that there are some occasions where local student unions are getting funds from IUSF to organize campaigns. It is important to note that none of these student unions owned any businesses. Thus, it can be clearly seen that student unions have to regularly depend on external funding or generate revenue via street funding. So, it is not surprising to see why any of these local student unions had not paid employees. However, 80 percent of the student unions said that they have an independent student-led media unit/newspaper/radio channel/TV channel. It could be also observed that many of these student unions were using social media as well, in particular, Facebook. This could be identified as a strength as it enables them to reach out to a large number of students with minimum effort.

Sixty percent of the student unions were electing their leaders whereas others were appointing them. There was no uniform mechanism of selecting leaders which was common to all local student unions. Examining the background of candidates for these leadership positions, 40 percent of the respondents denied that there was a hesitation among the students who were coming from low economic backgrounds, to run for positions in student unions. However, the same percentage of student leaders accepted that it is true to a certain extent. Even though one student union said that there was 80 percent of voter turnout, according to 40 percent of the respondents, there was a decrease in the voter turnout in student union elections. Also, it could be noted that most of the student unions did not have adequate data to analyze the patterns of voter turnout even though they had responded to above questions. Most importantly, despite the method of selection, all these leadership positions are voluntary. Also, it was found that there is no criterion to ensure the diversity of representatives taking these positions. So, it was not surprising why all the student leaders who responded to the survey were males. In a country which has a very low female political representation in Parliament, the arena of student politics could be seen as an untapped potential to politically socialize female students. However, the gathered data indicates that there was no proper mechanism within student unions to do it.

The common perception about university student unions is that they are closely connected to the leftist parties, in particular Frontline Socialist Party (FSP). However, the data also revealed a growing disconnection between the university student unions and FSP even though IUSF is still under the direct influence of FSP. Sixty percent of the respondents said that they do not have a close connection with one political party. One student leader mentioned that even though student unions do not have direct connections with the political parties, whenever it is necessary they discuss issues regarding students and society with them. Only one student union accepted that they have close connections with one political party. Nevertheless, the revealed disconnection between local student unions and political parties could be identified as a major turn in Sri Lankan student activism.

Also, 60 percent of the local student unions who took part in the survey mentioned that their professional and political agenda is independently decided without any influence from external parties. Having 40 percent of the student unions who did not either disagree with above or had a neutral opinion indicate that the professional and political agenda of local student unions seems to be still influenced by external parties to a certain extent. Eighty percent of the respondents said that they have no connections with multiple political parties. It shows the limited exposure of these student activists to different political ideologies because currently, IUSF is strongly influenced only by the leftist ideologies of FSP. However, all the student unions agreed that they have the sole discretion on internal structures and decision-making of their organizations. Having

their own bank account also implies financial independence to a certain extent even though IUSF provides financial support to local student unions for some campaigns. In terms of the connection between the student unions and trade unions, 40 percent of the student respondents said they have close connections whilst the same percentage of respondents disagreed. Thus, it shows that the connection between the local student unions and trade unions is not the same for all state universities.

Examining their political agenda for the year 2021, it could be noted that all local student unions had more or less similar issues, ranging from internal matters such as administration and student welfare, to cases with national-level importance such as privatization of higher education (e.g., proposed bill on Kotalawala Defense University). Student welfare issues were mostly about hostel facilities, university cafeterias, and Mahapola bursary (a monthly stipend given by the government to the students from low-income families). The importance given to these issues regarding facilities provided by the university for free or reduced price indicates how state university students consider these facilities as an entitlement. Prof. Sudantha Liyanage also mentioned that the dependent mentality of state university students has caused many issues even though “Free Education Policy” was a progressive measure which allowed many students to pursue their dreams regardless of the economic background of their families. He further mentioned that the current system needs some timely changes including educational reforms which could save the time of students by making sure that students graduate on time or take necessary actions for early graduation, while empowering them to stand from their own feet to conquer the world of work (S. Liyanage, personal communication, February 1, 2022).

Given that the in-person lectures at education institutions were disrupted due to Covid-19 pandemic, student unions had also demanded to reopen the universities with adequate Covid safety measures. One of their major demands from the government in the year 2021 was to solve the 2019 Advanced level Z score issue without delaying the university admissions. This issue was specific to that particular year as the government had failed to finalize the university admissions in time. Thus, the Z score issue and Covid-19 safety measures could be considered as exceptions which may not be repeated in their agendas like other common issues such as resistance toward student activism. Most importantly, 60 percent of the student unions said that they had large-scale protests in their universities during the previous year in response to above-mentioned issues. It shows that their political responses in the year 2021 were majorly based on contentious politics. However, all the student unions mentioned that usually, they use representation in the internal administration to politically respond in addition to contentious activities such as street protests, parades, and picketing. So, it could be seen as a progressive trend because student activism in Sri Lanka is mostly known for massive street protests which cause inconvenience to the general public.

75 percent of the participants mentioned that information on student representation in administration is available in institutional documents such as university constitution. However, all state universities do not follow the same method when it comes to student representation in internal administration structures. In some universities, there was a dedicated seat for a student representative with voting rights. Some universities were inviting students to the meetings in special circumstances in order to obtain specific information. Also, in some cases, there was a student representation for the board meetings of the institution. However, one respondent said

that neither they have a dedicated seat for student representatives nor they are regularly invited for the meetings. Thus, it could be implied that there is no uniform standard “in practice” for student representation in internal administration structures of universities. External administration structures did not have a student representation at all so that they were more disconnected with the student community.

According to 40 percent of the participants, student representatives were involved in their institutions’ committees, task forces, and working groups on education. These student representatives had voting power too. Another 40 percent said that they were involved as specialist consultants without voting powers. Also, 75 percent of the participants mentioned that students are involved as expert consultants without voting powers in committees, task forces, and working groups on quality assurance as well as in student welfare and external activities. Only one student union claimed that they were not involved in any of the above committees. Thus, it is evident that there is a necessity of increasing student representation in these specific committees as they allow student representatives to meaningfully contribute to the decision-making process within institutions. However, it could be identified that university departments have been more progressive and consistent in promoting student representation in the decision-making process because 80 percent of student unions mentioned that student representatives were taking part in department meetings or academic meetings regularly or sometimes. The main reason could be the provisions in the Universities Act, No. 16 of 1978 which stipulated a uniform standard for student representation in university faculties. According to the Universities Act (1978), every faculty of a university shall have a faculty board which consists of “two students elected by the students of the Faculty from among their number.”

Most importantly, according to 40 percent of the participants, it was possible for them to meet the highest position holders of the institution. The same number of participants said that they could informally meet them once in a while if any specific requirement emerges. These meetings could be initiated either by the students or administration. Student leaders having access to higher administration is an advantage because it could help to maintain a good rapport between the above two parties. However, Dr. Chandra Embuldeniya had a different opinion on this (C. Embuldeniya, personal communication, January 22, 2022). According to him, some vice-chancellors try to maintain a good rapport with student leaders in order to avoid or minimize student resistance toward administration. He further mentioned that the cost of this relationship makes higher administration to turn a blind eye to the ragging incidents or any other disciplinary breaches which are reported within their universities. According to Ranawana (2020), there were instances where some universities could nearly eliminate ragging due to the bold action taken by the vice-chancellors and rectors who personally took an extra risk.

The survey data revealed that student representatives have a close connection with all administrative officers including Chancellor and Vice-Chancellor. According to 80 percent of the participants, the institutional administration and student representatives had mutual trust and understanding to a certain extent. Sixty percent of the respondents agreed to a certain extent that institutional heads and administration take an authoritarian approach toward students despite the mutual understanding which was mentioned above. Considering these data, it could be implied that the relationship between the higher administration of state universities and student unions is a special connection which influences the direction of student activism as well as the institutional decision-making process of state universities.

Further examining the impact of student activism on higher education institutions, a progressive trend could be observed as 60 percent of the student unions said that the power of student representatives to influence the decisions of their institutions has been increased during the last five years. However, one concern raised by a participant is the declining ability of student representatives to effectively mobilize students, as student unions face significant resistance and violations from the authorities. This could be a growing concern for the student unions on top of the considerable portion of students who avoid student politics in state higher education institutions due to “ragging.” Also, moving academic activities to online platforms during the Covid-19 pandemic severely affected student activism, because it restricted student unions from mobilizing new students and their existing members through in person activities including “ragging.”

It could be found that usually, there are no part time or hourly basis jobs for the students within the higher education institutions in Sri Lanka. Forty percent of the respondents mentioned that undergraduates get such job opportunities on very rare occasions. According to them, half of those limited opportunities are library-related jobs. Information technology-related jobs and course assistant positions amount to the other half. As per survey results, all the student leaders had a moderate opinion regarding the convenience of finding information about such job opportunities. Eighty percent of them had a moderate opinion regarding the transparency of the selection process for those available student jobs. It could be assumed that lack of information regarding student jobs could cause doubts among students regarding the transparency of the selection process. However, it was interesting to note how all the respondents disagreed that only students who are having economic difficulties apply for these student jobs. Thus, it could be assumed that the students who come from privileged backgrounds have an advantage in securing these limited student jobs as many of them are not restricted by the English language barrier.

Sixty percent of the student leaders said that there are plenty of volunteering opportunities for students within their institutions, whereas the rest of them mentioned that they have volunteering opportunities to a certain extent. It was found that all the state universities provide volunteering opportunities to students, such as poster campaigns, organizing events, and cleaning campaigns. Also, it must be noted that most of the state universities in Sri Lanka have volunteer youth movements such as AIESEC, Leo, and Rotaract. These youth movements connect their members with students from other state and private universities as well as with other youth groups. It could also be observed that the majority of students who are taking part in these movements are anti-raggers because such opportunities allow them to create their own social space and engage in student activities without being a part of main student unions.

Only 40 percent of the participants said that their universities have a separate office to coordinate student-led activities. One student leader revealed how student-led activities are independently carried out without any support of their institution. Sixty percent of the student leaders said that their student movement supports and manages the student-led activities within the institution. This shows how student unions take ownership in creating social experience for the students. In terms of addressing student grievances, 80 percent of the participants said that their universities have a unit where students can present their grievances to. Only one respondent said otherwise. Student counselors were also mentioned as an option which students could utilize to inform their grievances to the institution. Though the above facilities were provided by the universities, only 40 percent of the student leaders could find consumer rights which students are

entitled to, in their institution's website. Same percentage of respondents were not even aware of such rights. Also, 60 percent of the respondents said that they are unaware whether their institution's website or any publications refer to students as service users or customers. Only one student leader said that their institution refers to students as "service users." Thus, it shows that institutional administration and relevant authorities have not taken adequate measures in order to make students aware of their consumer rights while referring to them as service users or customers of higher education.

Looking at the academic experience from student leaders' perspective, 80 percent of them fully or partially agreed that students are encouraged to get involved in discussions. According to the same percentage of student leaders, it is partially true that students have a choice to a certain extent with regards to the assessment process. Nobody said that it is impossible to challenge the learning content but 60 percent of them agreed it is true to a certain extent that teachers take an authoritarian approach in teaching. Thus, it is important to further examine the nature of student-teacher relationship within this context where students challenge university lecturers who take an authoritarian approach in teaching.

The survey data revealed that all the student leaders were extremely unhappy with the prevailing situation of the country. Also, 60 percent of them said that the intervention by the education institutions is extremely negative or negative to a certain extent in addressing such situations. Thus, it is not surprising why all the participants agreed that the higher education sector is moving in the wrong direction. The survey data indicated that the higher education sector needs to intervene in nation building with more authority. So, it is important to find the right directions for the higher education sector which could unleash its untapped potential. Most importantly, 80 percent of the participants said that students could largely change the direction of higher education in Sri Lanka, whereas one participant said that they can completely change it. However, 80 percent of these student leaders completely or partially agreed that street protests were the only way of making an influence on the national policies and laws on higher education regardless of their belief in the usefulness of student representation in internal administration to influence decision-making for the betterment of students. Also, it should be noted that only 40 percent of the participants agreed to a certain extent that government officials treat student representatives with respect. This could be also identified as a reason why they have more faith in taking their cause to the streets. Examining the recent student-led campaigns to influence national policies on higher education, it could be noted that massive street protests gained some wins for them though such demonstrations are inconvenient for the general public due to the heavy traffic caused by them.

Even though the political will is important to strengthen the higher education sector, current Sri Lankan context would not allow it to bring it up as an important issue. Eighty percent of the participants also mentioned that higher education-related matters were discussed in last elections to a certain extent but it was not a prioritized matter. Only 40 percent of the participants partially believed that if a political party needs to win an election, they cannot ignore the demands of the students. However, 60 percent of the respondents fully or partially believed that a political party could still win an election even if they disregard the student demands. Thus, it could be implied that political parties are not pressurized enough to consider the higher education sector as a priority when they prepare their political agenda. If student activists could create a strong public demand on this matter during the election periods, it would also make it easier for student unions

to reach out to political authorities, regarding the issues faced by students. Politicians would consider them serious if student demands are backed by the general public.

According to 60 percent of the participants, students in higher education are considered as adults. The rest of them believed that they are still considered as children. Also, 60 percent of these student leaders believed that they are seen as change agents in society. So, they also symbolically called themselves “a flame.” This data makes a strong case for the reasons behind the disconnection between the government authorities and student leaders because student leaders consider themselves as adults and change agents though other government authorities may not have the same view. One participant accepted that they are seen as troublemakers in society. Sixty percent of the participants partially or fully agreed that there is a risk in becoming a student activist in Sri Lanka. Considering the number of student leaders who were killed throughout history, their view on the risk involved in student activism is justifiable. However, it should also be noted that 40 percent of them had a neutral opinion about it.

Considering LOC-SIHEG 2021_Sri Lanka survey results, it should be noted that there are many areas to be developed in order to amplify the student impact on the higher education sector in Sri Lanka. The data indicates that necessary action should be taken by both institutional administration and government authorities. Such action should be accelerated and amplified with strong advocacy campaigns run by student activists. It is also evident that Sri Lankan student activism itself needs some modifications to overcome the challenges which hinder its progress despite their significant gains from confrontational politics though it has always been in the face of public criticism.

Conclusion

Student activism in Sri Lanka has a short history in comparison with other South Asian countries. However, student activists have been able to firmly establish their position in the political and social discourse in Sri Lanka. The notable role played by students in important historical events such as 1971 and 1988/9 youth uprisings as well as in the thirty years’ war and citizens’ protests to oust the President of the country in 2022 (famously known as “*Aragalaya*” which means “the struggle”) could be highlighted in this regard. Most importantly, the continuous struggle to preserve the “Free Education Policy” has been fueling student activism in Sri Lanka while making it the breeding ground for many student activists from state universities.

Throughout history, it could be clearly observed that one after another, the student movement in Sri Lanka has been heavily influenced by two leftist political parties, namely JVP and FSP. The fact that the majority of the local student unions did not acknowledge that they are connected with a political party indicates how influence by FSP on student movement takes a top-bottom approach rather than developing a strong ideological base at the local university level. Also, having the discretion on decision-making regarding the internal structures indicates that local student unions are not completely restricted from giving a new shape to their organizations as well as student activism in Sri Lanka.

Firstly, student unions in state universities need to strengthen their internal democracy. Holding elections to elect leadership positions would allow more students to democratically engage in

the decision-making process through their elected student representatives. Also, introducing a criteria to ensure diversity in leadership positions could take student activism in Sri Lanka to the next level. Most importantly, if the student unions could actively empower more female student leaders, that would ultimately contribute to filling the vacuum of female political representation in the country. Given that Sri Lanka is a country which needs to do more on peace-building and reconciliation after the end of thirty years of armed conflict, proposed diversity criteria for leadership positions should also take ethnic composition in state universities into consideration to make student unions more inclusive.

Secondly, it is very important for student unions to figure out innovative ways to politically socialize and mobilize their youngsters because the act of “ragging” has tarnished the reputation of student activism in Sri Lanka to a greater extent. The authorities and higher education institutions must be proactive and impartial in taking legal action against the perpetrators of “ragging.” Student activists must create a safe and welcoming environment for all students regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. The involvement of such a diverse student community will ultimately strengthen the student movement in Sri Lanka. It will also increase the quality of political response from the student unions in addressing important issues in the country as well as in the higher education sector.

Even though the survey data showed that student unions could influence the decisions within their universities, it is evident that student activists need to take an alternative approach when it comes to the national-level policymaking on higher education. This is due to the lack of attention given by the politicians who do not consider the higher education sector as a priority even though they briefly talk about it in their election campaigns. So, it is necessary to pressurize political parties to include the higher education sector in their election manifestos as a prioritized matter. If student unions could mobilize the university students as one voting bloc during the elections, politicians will take them seriously because their main concern is on the number of votes they get. Even after the election, student unions need to hold them accountable for what they promise to deliver. Student unions could look into the possibilities of amplifying their current usage of social media networks in order to gain more visibility to their campaigns and get the support from the general public. Student unions could also use legal tools such as “Right to Information Act, No 12 of 2016” which allows them to obtain necessary information from government authorities as it will help them to lead campaigns with data-driven decision-making. So, it is time to rethink the practicality of contentious student politics in an era where we could find more alternative ways to effectively and meaningfully advocate for positive change.

The dependent mentality of the majority of students from state universities could be identified as an issue which needs to be addressed with caution because state university students heavily relied on the government during their studentship as well as job-seeking period once they are done with their academic programs. It is important to change this mentality to allow the university student community to meaningfully contribute to the higher education sector as well as the development process of the country. The student unions were also relying on public donations and government funding. In order to get rid of this dependent mentality, student unions could set an example by starting to run business ventures so that they do not have to send first-year students to the streets to collect funds from the general public. Bringing in such an entrepreneurial mindset would completely change the narrative of student activism in Sri Lanka. They could also use such entrepreneurship schemes as an alternative for the act of “ragging,” to politically socialize

new students. Such programs will equip new students with employability skills which could be immensely useful when they enter the world of work.

This study emphasizes the importance of government authorities taking a holistic approach toward the higher education sector. Introducing national policies which could empower students while strengthening the institutional frameworks is a necessity. Such institutional frameworks should promote students as service users of the higher education sector who are entitled to strong consumer rights. Also, student representation should be increased in specific committees, task forces, and working groups which operate within state universities. However, such student representation should not amount to tokenization. So, it is important to give them voting power and get their direct involvement in these committees. Also, if state universities could create more student jobs within institutions, it would allow students to cover their expenses without solely depending on government bursary. This measure will also help them to get rid of the heavy-dependent mentality.

In conclusion, Sri Lankan student activism is now at a critical juncture where it needs a total transformation. Introducing a new model of student activism could be the solution to many problems in the higher education sector as well as in the sphere of student politics. Such model should be non-partisan so that student leaders could advocate for necessary policy changes without any political party biases. Student unions should also be developed as self-sustaining entities who could champion entrepreneurship, innovation, and sustainability. Most importantly, student activists need to get rid of the abusive subculture of “ragging” and transform that energy into something meaningful. Also, the proposed model should reflect the strengths and values of the diverse student community while getting rid of traditional patriarchal practices. It is crucial for student activists to figure out more effective and meaningful ways to politically respond in addressing important matters for the student community. Being creative would allow student activists to detach the proposed model from traditional confrontational approaches and innovate more powerful and effective strategies for advocacy and lobbying. The author believes that all young people in Sri Lanka should be given equitable opportunities to pursue their higher education in an environment where the quality of education is assured through strong regulations and periodic reviews. Thus, student activists may need to set aside their traditional slogans built around the goal of “preserving free education policy” and come up with new slogans on higher education such as “create equitable opportunities for everyone while ensuring the quality of education without leaving anyone behind.”

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