

University governance and student unrest

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Abstract

Even by South Asian standards the level of student unrest and violence in Sri Lankan universities is high. In spite of this there is a paucity of scholarly writing on this topic. In this paper the author will review what is available and reflect on insights gained as Vice-chancellor of the University of Sri Jaywardenepura during a turbulent period in its history.

Student unrest has a major impact on University governance. Frequent closures reduce academic productivity, saps the morale of students and staff, undermines the university's image in the public eye and has direct impact on the quality of education. The most important underlying cause of student unrest is the failure of a state university education to guarantee employment and upward social mobility. Students view it as a negation of the principles of equity inherent in the spirit of free education from which they have benefited.

Progressive reduction of the expenditure on public higher education aggravated by administrative inefficiency in its utilization, resulting in deficiencies in student welfare, coupled with lack of meaningful staff student interaction has enabled a radical minority to transform universities to centers of agitation where on the pretext of some trivial issue student unrest is engineered as a part of a political agenda.

The remedy is not greater policing, but more integrity and transparency in university governance with a greater student participation in decision making. An academic environment which motivates and stimulates them to self directed learning will not only distract them from disruptive behavior, but better prepare them for the world of work.