

Challenges of ethnic cohesion among undergraduates: A case study of South Eastern University of Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The world is longing for peace and reconciliation, when majority of the countries are entangled with tension and conflict among various ethnic and religious groups, tribes and so on. Sri Lanka, a home of multi-ethnic, multi-linguistic, multi-religious and multi-cultural community, was inevitably drawn into a protracted war for 3 decades with the separatist militant movement which resulted in not only the loss of lives estimated to be around 80,000, but also a loss of invaluable properties, displacement and other socio-cultural implications. Having defeated the militant movement in 2009, the people in the country are now longing for peace and reconciliation, despite the country witnessed a religious tension in certain places in the recent times with the political patronage given to certain extremist groups. Having realized the pivotal role of universities in fostering ethnic cohesion among the student population representing plural background, the successive governments implemented various projects promoting social harmony among the undergraduates. It is in this backdrop, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka spearheaded programmes, via various funded projects, aimed at promoting ethnic cohesion among the students. Although the university consists of diverse set of students from different background, such programmes have not yielded positive outcomes. On the contrary, lack of communication and understanding, hatred, suspicion and alienation have risen among the undergraduates. Thus, this study explores what kinds of programmes are undertaken by the university authorities to foster ethnic cohesion among the undergraduates and what sort of challenges they are confronting in doing the same. This is a qualitative study encompassing different data collection techniques. While primary data is collected based on the observation, in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, secondary data is obtained from books, journal articles and other secondary materials. The findings show that the university conducts various programmes such as cultural show, language courses, peace trips, inter-cultural programmes and grant celebration of festivals of all communities in order to promote ethnic cohesion among the undergraduates of SEUSL. It also shows that the language has been identified as a major stumbling block to the ethnic cohesion. The study concludes that various activities need to be undertaken to bridge the gap among the undergraduates representing different background.

Key Words: Militant movement, ethnic cohesion, lack of communication and understanding, hatred, suspicion and alienation