

Push and pull factors affecting the retention of university students in a climate of civil war

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Abstract

Despite over 70 years of research, the retention of university students remains a major issue. In countries ravaged by long-term strife, the failure of universities to retain students has both immediate and long-term catastrophic consequences.

Tinto (2005) identifies five factors that institutions can influence to increase retention. Somasundaram (2002) identifies psycho-social push and pull factors that affect the behaviour of civilian populations affected by chronic civil war such as that in Sri Lanka. This paper compares and contrasts these two conceptual models, illustrating the analysis with examples from individual cases.

The forces at play in a community under stress are more complex and aggravated than those at play in calmer communities. The authors conclude that all parties – academics, students, the government and the community – have responsibilities, and often the more important issues in retention are ethical, political and socioeconomic rather than pedagogical. The issue is not only that students who succeed progress in the knowledge economy and may in the long term help towards conflict reduction but also that dropping out may cause serious harm to both the individual and the community, costs that are often not counted.

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ISSN 1832-2050

Introduction

There are many countries in the world that are ravaged by long-term strife. At present, there are at least 20 wars being waged across the globe, some having continued for over 20 years. Most of the internal conflicts seem to be centred amongst the postcolonial, developing countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America. The resulting strife and suffering have been documented heavily in all these wars – along with the expected loss of life, there are many negative effects such as psychological trauma, collateral damage, displacement and poverty. The strife causes a breakdown in the infrastructure, which has a reinforcing effect, typically exacerbating the stressors and thereby increasing the likelihood of violence.

Universities are part of a society’s infrastructure. They serve several important functions in a society. These functions become more important in a strife-torn society. Firstly, universities deliver the skills and training needed to run a complex, contemporary society. Without graduates, the long-term sustainability of a society is threatened. Secondly, universities can provide a safe place for the integration of the different cultural and social groups in a country, groups who, outside the walls of the university, are busy fighting one another. Thirdly, they can foster higher order critical thinking in the community, and the ability to accept that there are multiple valid perceptions of a situation – a pre-requisite to resolving strife. Fourthly, they offer the possibility of a better life, a glimmer of hope, for both the students themselves and the community as a whole. And finally, a functioning university in a strife-torn community provides a bastion of normalcy, a much needed indicator that things cannot be that bad.

The Sri Lankan scene

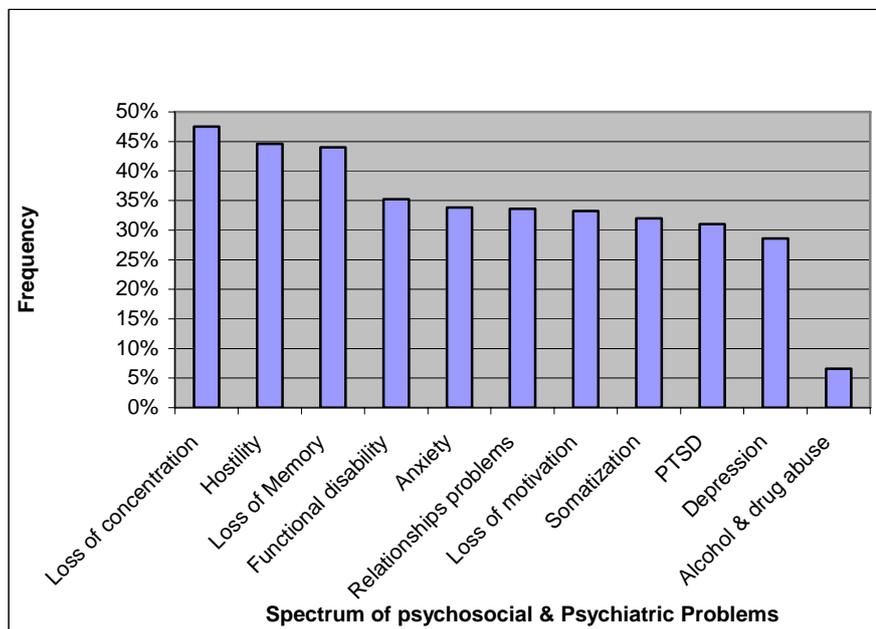
The majority of students in strife-torn countries have experienced multiple stressors, resulting in multiple psycho-social illnesses. Table 1 lists and Figure 1 illustrates the psycho-social problems reported among school and university students in northern Sri Lanka (adapted from Arunakiranthan, Sasikanthan, Sivashankar, & Somasundaram, 1993; Geevathasan, Somasundaram, & Paramesswaran, 1993; Sivashanmugaraja, Kalavany, & Somasundaram, 1994). The indicators of cognitive impairment – loss of memory and loss of motivation – are particularly relevant from a pedagogical perspective.

Table 1: Psycho-social problems in students in a war zone in rank order. N = 625 (100%)

Loss of concentration	297 (47.5%)
Hostility	279 (44.6%)
Loss of memory	275 (44%)
Functional disability	220 (35.2%)
Anxiety	211 (33.8%)
Relationship problems	210 (33.6%)
Loss of motivation	201 (33.2%)
Somatisation	200 (32.0%)
Post Traumatic Stress Disorders	194 (31.0%)
Depression	179 (28.6%)
Alcohol and drug abuse	41 (6.56%)

Figure 1: Psychosocial problems in students in a war zone

Source: Adapted from Arunakirinathan et al., 1993; Geevathasan et al., 1993; Sivashanmugaraja et al., 1994



The stressors that cause these illnesses can be grouped into two categories: direct stressors and indirect stressors. They are listed in Table 2.

Table 2: Stressors in students caused by war

Source: Adapted from Arunakirinathan, Sasikanthan, Sivashankar, & Somasundaram, 1993; Geevathasan, Somasundaram, & Paramesshwaran, 1993; Sivashanmugaraja, Kalaivany, & Somasundaram, 1994

Direct violence	
War death of relation	195 (31.8%)
Witnessing violence	156 (25.4%)
Threat to life	154 (25.1%)
Injury	45 (7.3%)
Detention	39 (6.4%)
Torture	23 (3.8%)
Indirect violence	
Displacement	241 (39.3%)
Economic problems	208 (33.9%)
Lack of food	92 (15.0%)

The indirect effects of war, such as displacement, unemployment, poverty, malnourishment and psychological problems, create a vicious circle, feeding into one another. The most prevalent of the stressors are listed in Table 2. Psychological problems, depression in particular, are more prevalent in displaced families (Jeyanthi, Loshani, & Sivarajini, 1993) and in students (Arunakirinathan, Sasikanthan, Sivashankar, & Somasundaram, 1993).

Student attrition – that is, the failure of students who start a program of study to complete it – is a subject of concern to both governments and the institutions themselves, and has been studied for over 70 years. However, most of these studies have been in stable countries such as the United States of America, Great Britain and Australia. The Australian federal government, for example, tracks and publishes student attrition data across its various universities (Department of Education, Science and Training, 2004). It funds studies to report completion rates across multiple demographics (Martin, Maclachlan, & Karmel, 2001). In recent years there has been concern over the high rates of dropouts and irregular attendance in schools in intense conflict situations. For example, such rates in Northern Sri Lanka reached the alarming proportions of 25–50%, the highest in the island in the late 1990s, whereas it had been very low in the pre-war years.

Retention remains a critical issue for the university as well as the community as a whole. At the immediate level, university students are typically in the age group from which combatants are recruited, and a reduction in attrition rates will translate directly into fewer combatants. This is also the age group targeted by security forces for arrests and detention, and is at risk of migration out of the area or country. Perhaps more importantly, local graduates represent a critical resource for the subsequent growth and development of the country. Without these graduates the country will not be able to extricate itself from a poverty trap.

Universities in strife-torn countries face much more fundamental problems than those that universities in stable societies need to deal with. Recruitment of students faces hurdles like the frequent postponement of the all important school leaving examinations. The academic year is often disrupted, with classes suspended for months at a time. The placement of students for practice-based learning activities as well as post-graduation is difficult, since often only essential services operate, and travelling for placements is hazardous. At the University of Peradeniya's Faculty of Engineering, students' in-plant training at the Sri Lanka Telecom and Ceylon Electricity Board is considered a valuable experience leading to permanent positions and yet these two organisations for security reasons have asked that Tamil students not be sent to them. As a result the Faculty does not send Tamil students to these organisations, thereby breaking trust with a section of the students rather than refusing to deal with these two organisations. In instances where Tamils had been sent to high security plants, enthusiastic engineers of a nationalistic mindset there have not allowed the trainees entry to sensitive areas, instead asking the students to cook up their diaries as though they had worked there and go through examinations based on these diaries – students naturally comply so as to meet their graduation requirements. Similarly in the Faculty where students who had studied in Sinhalese or Tamil up to high school are switched overnight to English, some Sinhalese lecturers teach in Sinhalese, thereby leaving out their Tamil students. In a particular department, Production Engineering, where this enthusiasm to help Sinhalese students has exceeded all limits, no Tamil student has opted to read that attractive discipline for some years now. One of these writers has formally raised these issues without receiving a response – for the Faculty would not know how to deal with it because of the predominant majoritarian sentiments.

Pregnant with ethical implications for the University of Peradeniya is the issue of many of its senior academics (including a previous Vice-Chancellor) standing as parliamentary candidates of the nationalist party Sihala Urumaya in the 2002 elections. This party says that Tamils are welcome in Sri Lanka only if they assimilate and become Sinhalese. The issue is how fairly they would treat their Tamil students.

In such a climate, students cease to value the academic program and are retained only for lack of alternative opportunities. It is therefore understandable that few resources are left available for either the study or the implementation of retention practices.

This paper therefore explores this problem by examining theoretical developments in the field of student retention developed principally for western institutions, using as a lens the forces at play in strife-torn countries. The paper illustrates the exploration with brief examples drawn from the situation in northern Sri Lanka.

Sri Lanka is a relatively small island, with a population of approximately 20 million, roughly the same as Australia's. It has a total of 15 universities, the oldest being the University of Peradeniya, the legal successor to the University of Ceylon, founded in 1942.

Generally the best students at the General Certificate of Education (Advanced Level) enter the state universities and receive free education (these numbered 14,237 in 2005). The rest either go abroad (about 1000 based on estimates from visas issued by embassies) or enter private institutions that prepare local students for the examinations of accredited overseas institutions. An exception is a small English proficient cream with good grades who have high enough scores to enter the local universities but who obtain and accept full scholarships at prestigious foreign universities. As such, Sri Lankan public universities still operate on an elitist model (Trow, 2006), based on a meritocracy (vitiating slightly by regional quotas which, however, are still allocated on merit within each region).

While internationally strife in Sri Lanka is most commonly connected with the Tamil Tigers in northern Sri Lanka, it has had two other significant crises instigated by the Jathika Vimukthi Perumana (JVP), a radical left Sinhalese group, that have impacted universities and students. The first was in April 1971 when the JVP tried to overthrow the duly elected government, a government for whose election they had campaigned vigorously in the 1970 general elections. The second was from 1987–1989. The JVP has always had a strong university presence in the South and still does so. They control the important student bodies and have murdered students, staff and Vice-Chancellors who defied them.

Tamil unrest began in the early 1970s because of several factors, including the introduction of ethnic quotas for university admission. From the late 1970s, the Sri Lankan army behaved like an occupation army in regions with a predominantly Tamil population – the north and east of Sri Lanka. The situation coalesced in the 1980s, with different armies controlling different geographical areas and the boundaries periodically shifting. After a ceasefire from 2002–2005, an undeclared war appears to have restarted.

The revolt sharply affects the predominantly Tamil speaking universities – the University of Jaffna in northern Sri Lanka, Eastern University in the Batticaloa area and South Eastern University (a predominantly Muslim university) in the Amparai area. The University of Jaffna was cut off owing to a blockade of sorts by the two warring parties from 1990 to 1996 and again recently. The University of Jaffna was founded in 1974 as a campus of the University of Ceylon, and achieved independent university status in 1978. The university is in Thirunelveli, close to Jaffna town, with a satellite campus in Vavuniya, about 150 kilometres away. Its faculties include Engineering, Agriculture, Medicine, Arts, Science, Management Studies and Commerce, although the Engineering faculty in legal existence is yet

to take off owing to the onset of fighting between the Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE).

Analytical framework

Braxton and Hirschy (2005), in summarising the studies of student retention, categorise them into four sets of theoretical models:

1. Economic – weighing the costs and benefits
2. Organisational – the role of organisational structure and behaviour
3. Psychological – the psychological characteristics and processes
4. Sociological – the social structures and forces.

Pride of place among theories of student departure undoubtedly belongs to Tinto's interactionalist theory. "Tinto's theory on student departure is the most studied...[and] indexed in more than 775 citations" (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 66). His views of student departure as "a longitudinal process" of "interactions between the academic and social systems of a given college or university" (Braxton & Hirschy, 2005, p. 67) are essentially a socio-psychological model, particularly if one views the university organisation and academic systems as social structures.

Economic and organisational models can also be represented as external and internal factors. External economic factors such as university costs, scholarships and loans are external/social forces while the students' own interpretations and the relative importance that they give to various economic factors relate to their internal/psychological factors. In similar vein, organisational factors can be viewed as external, with their effect on the individual student being internal. Such a model also helps provide a clearer distinction as to why certain economic or social structures may cause individual students to behave differently.

Under the setting of a civil war environment, the retention of university students remains an extremely important issue. Students who choose to remain at university not only are less likely, if left alone, to join in violence themselves but also may use their skills to help prevent long-term conflict. However, in reality, militant factions target university students for direct recruitment to their cause, or to do supportive secondary work in demonstrations and agitations. Often university students are in the forefront of strikes, protests and violent clashes with the armed forces. In northern Sri Lanka, liberal and alternative ways of thinking have been weeded out by the Tamil militants who keep a tight rein on the universities owing to the potential power that the students wield.

The authors suggest that the most significant difference between attrition in stable nations and that in strife-torn nations is in the social and psychological forces at play, certainly in their intensity, if not their nature.

Elsewhere, the concept of push and pull factors has been used to analyse the pressures that lead to child labour and the induction of children as soldiers (Somasundaram, 2002). Push factors characterise the external/social forces acting on the individual while pull is used to characterise the internal/psychological factors at play.

In this case, push and pull factors are used to promote the recruitment of young soldiers. This categorisation provides a useful framework to look at the factors

pushing or pulling children towards war, as it helps contrast between social, governmentally malleable influences and introspective, psychologically related impacts. In Somasundaram's paper (2002) about child soldiers, he lists the following push factors: education; security; economy; and social/political suppression. Listed pull factors include heroism, altruism, adventure, indoctrination, etc.

It is worth noting that in Sri Lanka, as in many Asian countries, parents, the extended family and the community provide a much greater degree of push than in typical western societies, particularly in communities that have not been fully urbanised and where education provides the few avenues for advancement, such as in northern Sri Lanka.

Analysis

Tinto (2005) recently identified and discussed five essential qualities that universities need to adopt for successful retention: commitment; expectations; support; feedback; and involvement. This paper uses these five qualities as a framework, and applies the push/pull binary as a lens for teasing out in greater depth the forces at play in the retention of students in an environment of chronic civil strife.

Commitment

External commitment is the long-term devotion of resources aimed towards helping students succeed in their studies – the effort that the university gives towards the students will often be reciprocated. In northern Sri Lanka, push factors come into operation long before the student is admitted to university. The community itself actively engenders a commitment to study, and from the primary school years students who have their noses in their books are praised. Children who study, for example, are not only routinely excused but actively discouraged from household chores. One female student who subsequently gained admission to medicine recalls that, though her sisters were expected to help with kitchen chores, she was chased away when she volunteered. "Girls who study need not learn how to cook well. Go and study and become a doctor" was the attitude of her home. In their final years at high school, students may spend up to five hours a day at private tuition classes in addition to normal school hours.

The commitment to education and study is partly driven by economic needs, and the need to advance in society, and to escape. The commitment is usually not to a particular discipline of interest or a particular institution. The majority of students therefore select their discipline based on the discipline of study with job prospects that their grades allow them to enter rather than a discipline of interest. Once they have been admitted, there is little program attrition owing to students moving from one discipline to another, as in general they are not allowed to do so (see by contrast Queensland Studies Authority, 2004).

Institutional attrition, whereby students leave one university to study at another, has been reported to be as high as 50% in some of the literature in a stable, mature environment (Queensland Studies Authority, 2004). However, the situation is more complex in strife-torn regions. In such regions, it is useful to differentiate between moving to another university within the same country and moving to another country altogether.

The oddity of factors in institutional dropout is seen in Sri Lanka where, for example, at the war-affected University of Jaffna, because of staff fleeing the country, the Medical Faculty is perceived to be at a lower standard. Thus Sinhalese and Muslim students first gain admission to that university and then try to cite hardship conditions in ethnically alien Jaffna to shift to higher ranked – in terms of student preferences – medical faculties in the South. This has become a successful and regular process of getting into the better medical faculties. Jaffna's medical faculty with places for 125 students had to operate at 75 or so.

Pressure against this has come from three quarters. First, the University of Jaffna prefers to avoid moving their students, thereby leaving them with empty classrooms and a reputation as being hostile to other communities studying in Tamil Jaffna. Second, other medical faculties complain that patients at their overcrowded teaching hospitals have too many students poking into their privacy one after the other. Particularly the highly ranked medical faculties at Peradeniya and Colombo have complained that Jaffna students with lower entry scores – the intending transferees from Amparai and the rural South generally do have lower scores – do not fit into their classes with their high performing students. And third, Tamil students and their parents from Jaffna have complained that the transfer is a route of entry to the prestigious medical faculties that is not open to them. As a compromise, the University Grants Commission has since the renewed hostilities of 2005 allowed the transfers, provided that the degree of the transferees comes from the University of Jaffna through credit transfer from where they attend classes. Several administrative issues still need to be sorted out over this.

In strife-torn countries, the conflict is typically geographical, with different factions having primary control in different geographical areas. Travel between such areas is difficult and often hazardous. Civilians often need special travel permits to pass through several checkpoints. University students, being of the same age group as combatants, are particularly vulnerable when passing through checkpoints. There are also risks at the campus and its surroundings.

In previous generations, a typical pattern was for students to finish an undergraduate program in their native country, then obtain postgraduate qualifications overseas, work for a few years to build a nest egg and return (Bass, 2006; Hoole, 1997). However, patterns have changed, with those who study overseas often not returning, and this appears to be a trend in South Asian countries that are not strife-torn as well (Bass). On the other hand, leaving in the middle of undergraduate study, which does not make economic sense in peaceful communities, is not uncommon in strife-torn countries, particularly in fields such as the humanities and social sciences where even after graduation there is no guarantee of employment. For example, the authors are aware of a mechanical engineering graduate from the University of Peradeniya going as a hotel maid to the Middle East because of the financial attractions of foreign employment. In these circumstances, an arts undergraduate dropping out when seeing a foreign opportunity is not hard to imagine.

Nonetheless, the factors with professional schools are indeed different because of the high premium placed by society on the medical and engineering professions. The authors are aware of students with admission to professional programs in medicine and engineering in Sri Lanka but unable to start because of indefinite university closure, returning after a gap of four years to begin and complete their studies – even after displacement overseas, immigrating to Canada in one instance, after completing a science degree in Zambia and in several examples after acquiring professional non-degree qualifications in accountancy.

Expectations

Expectations form a vital part of the achievement that a university can count on from a student. Universities which hold low expectations of their students naturally prevent those students from achieving their fullest – high expectations are necessary to unlock the students’ potential. Different expectations are often imposed on different groups of students, and students are quick to pick up on this disparity – often showing in their success at university.

As discussed earlier, a student’s extended family and the local community place high academic expectations on successful students. However, in times of war, there are often expectations of heroism as well (Somasundaram, 2002). These expectations come from the community as well as from the students’ own psyche.

Military forces often have a presence in the campus, such as the Reserve Officer Training Corps in the United States of America. In strife-torn countries, combatant groups often have “wings” on campus, either officially or unofficially. Academic staff may themselves belong to such a network. The network may provide some of the involvement (Tinto, 2005) and sense of belonging that students need. The net effect of this network may vary – it may help the student to stay until graduation, or it may recruit the student immediately into active military service, depending on the relative importance that the militant organisation gives to the skills provided by the university and the urgency with which the organisation needs recruits. Usually in Sri Lanka the militants have encouraged students to finish their course of study, although since the end of 2005 a new attitude is emerging where those who choose studies over the needs of the organisation are depicted as selfish. This was openly expressed when students of the University of Jaffna by and large failed to report in areas controlled by the militants for training – an estimated figure of 600 reporting out of the university’s 7000 students has been mentioned.

Nevertheless, the motivation to complete study is strong. “We want no political involvement. We will keep our mouth shut despite all the iniquities until we get our certificate. That is enough to go abroad and survive. My priority is to earn a dowry for my sister” is the common paraphrased refrain of many of the students questioned.

The government of Sri Lanka has a successful track record of rehabilitating and retaining militant students who otherwise would have been dropouts involved in insurgencies. For example, Sinhalese university students involved in insurrections in 1971 and again in 1987–1990 have been provided with books while in jail, allowed to sit their examinations and offered amnesty, and are today pillars of society. This generosity of the victor, coming from clear-sightedness in times of peace, has not been extended to the Tamil militancy because those in power do not belong to the same community and there has been no clear winner in the Tamil war for such magnanimous policies to be implemented. Besides, the little rehabilitation that was attempted with Tamil militants suffered a setback when all those at a rehabilitation camp in Bindunuwewa, 27 in number, were murdered in October 2000 by the hostile guards and surrounding community (Human Rights Watch, 2002). A successful exception of Tamil rehabilitation is the example of a Tamil Eelam Liberation Organisation militant from the Law College who was in prison with JVP prisoners in the early days of the Tamil militancy in the 1970s. He, with his Sinhalese prison mates, was provided with the necessary books, notes and facilities to sit examinations. Graduating, he is today a full-time executive working for Amnesty International in Washington, DC. His rehabilitation was, however, through policies intended for Sinhalese JVP students at that time.

Support

Support can come in three forms – academic, social and financial. Students are often unprepared for the difficulty of higher level studies, and support can be provided in various ways – tutoring, student-based study groups, administrative advice – to assist them in maintaining a strong study ethic. Social, family and peer support is particularly important when considered against the background of a civil war. Of these, family support, both economic and moral, is perhaps the most important in keeping students at the university. As wars are often between an ethnic majority and a minority, social support in the form of “counseling, tutoring and ethnic student centres” (Tinto, 2005) can serve as areas from which marginalised students can safely explore the rest of the university. Support institutions such as churches and particularly health care providers are sorely stretched and unable to provide such support.

In a country in strife, belonging to a militant group often provides a greater sense of belonging and security than being a civilian. Civilians have no means of defending themselves, and cannot even express their anger or frustrations for fear of retaliation. As members of a militant group, on the other hand, comrades provide a sense of belonging to a powerful group and physical support and protection.

The level of (external) support required by students is dependent in part on their own internal resilience. In strife-torn countries the evidence suggests that the students’ own internal resilience is weakened – for example, Post Traumatic Stress Disorders are more common.

An important expectation is that universities will teach critical thinking skills, and to a lesser extent morality and ethics. To try to teach critical thinking or ethics while ignoring the strife, by far the most ethical situation affecting the community, would result in an artificial, theoretical pedagogy that would cause the students to lose their respect for their teachers. However, combatants are very hostile to those who question their actions, and it is not unusual for teachers who speak out to be killed or punished. For example, when Hoole (2002), and Hoole and Hoole (2002, 2003) taught human rights to their engineering students, dealing explicitly with the communal issues that divided the mixed ethnic class, the students, after initial caution, welcomed the exercise while the university preferred charges on teaching political material. (In the event, after a lengthy inquiry the university lauded the effort.) Students, on the other hand, are in a more precarious position, unable to voice their own ethical concerns for fear of physical safety.

In recognition of these concerns, the University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka provided close to 1 million Rupees to each of the universities to be spent on improving social harmony. While just a few universities embarked on laudable projects addressing the pressing social problems confronting students such as taking southern students to Jaffna and *vice versa*, many used the money for routine development projects – for example, a new canteen was built on the grounds that it helped students to sit down and talk to one another.

Similarly, seminars on peace studies in luxury hotels for academics were organised by the University Grants Commission on the initiative of a foreign academic group, with each of the universities sending representatives. Funding came as part of the group’s government’s aid package to Sri Lanka – a common mechanism for nationals from donor governments using the fixed allocation of aid from their countries for their own purposes. Although the effort was laudable, it seems not to have had any significant impact in light of i) the initiators not being local (local

investment in time being more engendered by that rare expense paid opportunity to live in a five-star hotel than by commitment to the ideals of peace), ii) the mode of the financial investment and iii) significantly the participants – Sinhalese as well as Tamil – being often the very persons presiding over the iniquitous system and providing the theoretical defence of fratricidal activities by the military and guerrillas.

Feedback

Feedback provides an important forum for students to comment on how effective their learning has been. It has been well documented that student-based assessment of what they are learning, even in the form of “one-minute surveys”, does improve student retention and persistence. If students believe that their input is taken seriously and has an impact on how the university works, they often feel more involved in the course as a whole.

Feedback can also effectively be non-academic. Under an enlightened engineering Dean at the University of Peradeniya, regular consultations with Tamil and Sinhalese student leaders in the year 2000 helped defuse tensions such as when Tamils lit crackers upon an army camp falling to Tamil guerrillas and Sinhalese students asking Tamil students as a test of loyalty to contribute to a fund for the widows of fallen soldiers. This consultative process put Tamil students at ease and the commonly agreed new rules eased the pressure on them to leave campus for their homes in fear of trouble.

Involvement

Student involvement in social and academic activities at the university is a crucial factor for student retention, a factor that has been identified in many studies. The positive engagement between the administration and the different ethnic communities mentioned in the preceding paragraph is a successful example of social activities that helped retention.

The more that the students participate with fellow students and in coursework, the more likely they are to persist through their course. Academic involvement is reduced to the extent that competing factors draw the student’s focus. In addition, political involvement in student parties may be seen as a dangerous pastime, owing to the militants’ influence among some student bodies.

Conclusion

The populations in strife-torn countries face a high level of stress. What is often not realised is that the stress on civilians is usually much higher than among combatants since their safety and support structures are often much weaker. The late teens and early adulthood are also a time of significant stress even in the normal course of events, and therefore university students who belong to that age group when in the midst of war are especially vulnerable, particularly as they could be a specifically targeted age group.

In strife-torn countries, the support networks are often under enormous pressure. Students who are attending university may be sometimes viewed as a pampered elite by society, and the community may not be aware of the stress that they bear.

This paper has focused on students in war-torn countries. Nevertheless, some of the analysis done here may be applicable to some students in developed countries as well. Minority students may perceive some university campuses as hostile territory. They may experience tension between adopting mainstream values as being a traitor and retaining their group's values and culture as a matter of heroism.

The academic community in a strife-torn milieu is itself under enormous stress from the conflict. Furthermore, university staff, with their often international qualifications, find it easier to move overseas when there is strife, and thus the continuity needed to develop sound systems is often not possible.

In such an environment, the classical strategies for reducing student attrition do not work. Institutions may try to pull up the drawbridge, and pretend that universities are isolated, cloistered, safe enclaves. However, the purpose of civil strife is to create a destabilised environment for political ends, and combatants do not like calm oases as they could develop into areas out of their control and send the wrong message.

The civil infrastructure in war-torn countries is almost invariably in disarray. The institutional protocols for recruitment, retention and placement are treated as low priorities. The environment becomes a vicious circle. The predicament faced by universities in strife-torn countries is that they are trying to build a bastion that is being torn down more quickly than it is being built.

Acknowledgements

Daya Somasundaram and Ratnajeevan Hoole acknowledge the timely support of the Scholar Rescue Fund, Institute of International Education, New York. Ratnajeevan Hoole gratefully acknowledges the assistance of the Scholars at Risk Network, New York.

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