ORIGINAL ARTICLE

DEALING SMOOTHLY WITH STUDENT ACTIVISM: REFLECTIONS OF ACTIVISTS AND ADMINISTRATORS IN SRI LANKAN STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

M.S. Dimuthu Kumari [*1], R.L.S. Fernando [2]

[1] Lecturer, Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. Email; samanmaleed@sjp.ac.lk

[2] Senior Professor, Department of Public Administration, Faculty of Management Studies and Commerce, University of Sri Jayewardenepura, Sri Lanka. Email: rlsf@sjp.ac.lk

*Coresponding author

Abstract

Activism is natural in any context. Similarly, in Sri Lanka student activism has been a prolonged issue in the state university system. As many sources mentioned, it has been deeply embedded in the system, thus eradicating activism is impossible. Therefore, we need to find some strategies to break the early development of activism and to weaken the impact. However, the local authorities have simply labeled student activism as a political matter and ignored them for years in Sri Lanka. Past studies have extensively discussed the negative consequences of activism, yet the prevention strategies are rarely spoken. Therefore, this study aims to seek strategies to deal with activism smoothly. Since the art of handling conflicts is subjective, this study employed the phenomenological approach under the qualitative strategy. A sample of administrators and student activists was selected using purposive and snowballing sampling techniques. In-depth interviews were conducted to collect data and they were analyzed thematically. Mediation strategies were revealed from both activists' and administrators' perspectives. Accordingly, this study revealed that activists expect a fair, respectful, friendly, humanistic, and genuine approach from the administrators' end. Administrators seek more autonomy and democratic governance when dealing with activism and they revealed some unique issues of their side. Two-Way communication, flexibility in mechanisms, humanistic approaches, more participation are the concerns where both parties are well thought out. All the identified strategies will be useful in handling activism smoothly in the future.

Keywords: Student Activism, Activists, Administrators, Strategies, State Universities

Introduction

Sri Lanka has continuously recorded one of the highest literacy rates in the region. Being a developing country, this achievement is never possible without the execution of free education policy. It was executed in Sri Lanka from 1947 enabling all citizens to gain education freely until the tertiary level, which was otherwise restricted to an elite group. The state sector has been the leader in providing tertiary education to the nation from the beginning, thus, today there is a deep-rooted network of state universities in Sri Lanka. To be more specific, there are 15 well–established state universities, which accommodate approximately 30000 new students annually, and the number is on the rise. However, the state university system often endures pains due to some inherited issues including student activism. Student activism, which has usually referred as 'student politics' in the Sri Lankan context has been a prolonged issue that ended up with a huge economic and social cost.

Student activism often reflects through the clashes between the students and administrators in the Sri Lankan context. The Ministry of Higher education and the University Grant Commission exists as the main policymaking bodies regarding the state university system and the designed policies are implemented by university administrators. The term 'University Administrator' in the Sri Lankan context covers a huge range of academic and non-academic positions including the Vice Chancellors, Deans, Department Heads, Registrars, and Disciplinary Officers, etc. Their role immensely contributed to the survival of the system since they handle all the administrative matters in universities. All secretarial tasks in between admissions and graduations of students, welfare provisions, discipline maintaining, conducting examinations, issuing results, professional matters of academics, physical development projects etc. are conducted by the university administrators.

'Student Activists' are the students who are actively involved in collective efforts which focus on institutional or social changes. The socio-economic composition of the student population in Sri Lankan state universities is diverse. The majority of them are from rural lower or middle-income families who have experienced numerous hardships in life. Therefore, they are easily be exposed to struggles, which aim at social justice at various levels. As mentioned by White (2003)[1] there are different types of activists in any campus; high left, middle left, and conservative. Based on these categories their engagement level might be different. As noted by Smaranayake (2015)[2] high level of politicization leads to riots, rebellion, moderate participation results in demonstrations like picketing, and minimal politicization limits the orientation to voting and discussions. All these types are noticeable in the Sri Lankan state university system. However, it should be noted that there is an inherent cost associated with all levels of activism. Because of endless student movements, many parties including students, university administrators, and the government endure suffering. The cost of activism includes the incidents of deaths, injuries, custody, arrest, suspension of students; damaging public properties, and closure of universities. Considering the students, these movements have caused heavy destruction to their studies. On the aspect of university administration, incidents of taking hostages by the activists, putting barriers for entering university facilities, damaging properties, and causing damages to life including assassinations have been reported in Sri Lanka. Also, administrators in state universities are often hampered by handling these types of destructive acts, whereby the valuable time and energy could otherwise be used on concentrating and engaging in institutional planning, implementation, and monitoring works (University Student Charter, 2012)[3]. In this context, traditionally Sri Lankan authorities brush off student activism, labelling them as results of negative political socialization.

Even though there was a trend of politicalized movements many decades back, it is not the same case anymore.

However, it is noteworthy that the activism has brought numerous positive changes to the system, particularly in the aspects of administrative changes, caused for the improvement of welfare facilities, infrastructure developments, curriculum revisions, and protection of free education at large. Yet, only the negative aspect of activism is frequently heard in the Sri Lankan context. Studies have found that many student movements in modern societies run as value-oriented movements, which aim for collective benefits particularly in educational, welfare, or civil matters in society. Many of those movements are against the government-initiated socio-economic reforms in the global context. However, many contemporary movements in the Sri Lankan context focus on university-based internal matters. Some selected student movements in Sri Lanka during the 2008-2017 period are shown in table no. 01.

Table 1
Main student movements in Sri Lankan state university system during 2008-2017

Year	Student Movements In State Universities
2008	Inter University Students' Federation (IUSF) protests since 2005 demanding increase of Mahapola from 2500 LKR. to 5000 LKR. It is a welfare subsidy given by the Government of Sri Lanka to university Students
2009	Continued same movement
2010	Movement of IUSF with the opposition to the privatization of universities and followed by worsening conditions on campuses.
2011	IUSF protests to release their fellow students, arrested during protests against privatization of state universities.
2012	Continued same movement
2013	IUSF protests against 'collecting charges in government schools which provide 'free education'
2014	Para medical student movements demanding few claims 1) demanding for the examination admission to the fourth batch of the nursing course; 2) forcing to stop the suppression of students by imposing prevention of entry to examinations; 3) forcing to stop obstructions caused for their extracurricular activities by the administration
2015	IUSF movements for assisting Higher National Diploma in Accountancy (HNDA) students in the Sri Lanka Institute of Advanced Technological Education (SLIATE) to force government demanding the degree status for their Diploma which lasts for four years.
2016	IUSF movements against establishing Private Medical Faculties in University system

2017	Continued the same movement

<div align="right">Source: Kumari & Fernando (2020)[4]</div>

Further, when analysing the root causes of activism, both global and local literature (Burgess & Hofstetter, 1971; Janc, 2004; Weeramunda, 2008)[5,6,7] has discussed student activism as a result of deficiencies in university administration. 'The Report of the President's Commission on-Campus Unrest, (1970)[8] concluded that the actions and inactions of government at all levels have contributed to campus unrest so that the resolving responsibility is essentially vested with them. Because the movements became worst and the cost of activism was increased than usual due to the inability of the administration to handle them properly. Mouffe (2000)[9] suggests administrators accept activism as an acceptable feature of human nature that brings about reforms and transformation in society. Thus, the relevant authorities have a huge responsibility towards the possible social cost of poorly managed student activism.

Many have discussed the reasons for student activism, yet, the prevention strategies rarely discoursed particularly in the Sri Lankan context. The global level recommendations are also embedded with unique socio-cultural values in each society. Therefore, exploring such approaches in a local context is timely important. Though there is little discussion in the literature, those studies have been conducted highlighting the reflections of one party. However, since activism is a result of conflicting interests between two parties, the voices of both ends should be heard. Hence, the current study takes the ideas of both activists and administrators together into the dialog, thus, it provides an unprejudiced view.

Lastly, this study aims to seek strategies to deal with activism well, so that the negative consequences could be reduced. If the activism can be handled smoothly both parties may end up with win-win situations.

Methods

This study adopts inductive reasoning research philosophy. Hence, this is a qualitative study, and phenomenology was selected as the methodological approach. Because, many authors have suggested phenomenology as the best-suited approach for an inquiry of one's real-life experiences about the phenomenon in the world; Moustakas, 1994; Cresswell, 2007; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, cited by Harrison and Mather (2017)[10]. Both primary and secondary data sources were used. Primary data was gathered through in-depth interviews with the respondents. All student leaders (activists) and the responsible administrators were identified as the population of the study. Among them, 10 Student leaders (including Union presidents, Secretaries, and Treasurers, etc.) and 10 Administrators (including Student Counselors, Marshals, Wardens, Senior Lecturers, and Welfare Registrars) who directly involved with student matters were chosen as the sample (see table no.02). The purposive sampling technique was used to collect data from the administrators. The researcher reached them with professional contacts at each university and invited them for the interview. The snowball sampling technique was used to collect data from the activists since they have an island-wide informal network of members. Then, in-depth interviews (20-30 minutes each) were conducted and respondents were allowed to freely express their ideas with a minimal inference of the researcher. The researchers recorded many interviews with the permission of respondents. The thematic analysis was used to analyze the data thus, patterns were identified through a rigorous

process of data familiarization, data coding, theme development, and revision. Also, researchers reconnected with some respondents and got some unclear places clarified again with their own experiences (member checking) to ensure the validity of data. The researchers compared and contrasted the concepts and findings of previous literature to enhance the trustworthiness of data. The study setting was limited to the state universities in Sri Lanka.

Table 2
Demographic analysis of the sample

Administrators				
Respondent No:	position	Male/female	Experience/yrs	Institution Attached
Ad- R 01	Chief Security Officer (CSO)	Male	05	University of Kelaniya (UOK), SL
Ad- R 02	Senior Assistant Registrar (SAR)	Male	07	(UOK)
Ad- R 03	Hostel Warden	Male	05	(UOK)
Ad- R 04	Hostel Warden	Female	13	(UOK)
Ad- R 05	Senior Lecturer	Male		(UOK)
Ad- R 06	Senior Assistant Registrar (SAR)	Female	07	Open University Sri Lanka (OUSL)
Ad- R 07	Senior Student Counselor	Male	30	(OUSL)
Ad- R 08	Marshal	Male	05	(OUSL)
Ad- R 09	Student Counselor/Senior Lecturer	Male	21	University of Sri Jayewardenepura (USJP)
Ad- R 10	Marshal	Male	15	(USJP)
Student Leaders/Activists				
Respondent No:	position	Male/female	Representing	Institution Attached
SL -R 01	President	Male	main student body	University of Moratuwa, Sri Lanka (UOM)
SL -R 02	Treasurer	Male	main student body	(UOM)
SL -R 03	President	Male	Faculty union	University of Colombo, Sri Lanka (UOC)
SL -R 04	Secretary	Male	faculty union	(UOC)
SL -R 05	President	Male	main student body	Wayamba University, Sri Lanka (WUSL)
SL -R 06	President	Male	faculty union	(WUSL)
SL -R 07	President	Male	main student body	(UOK)
SL -R 08	Secretary	Male	main student body	(UOK)
SL -R 09	Treasurer	Male	main student body	(UOK)

SL -R 10	President	Male	main student (USJP) body

Results and Discussion

The following section analyzes data collected from the activists and the administrators through interviews. Accordingly, the first section discusses the concerns raised by Activists the latter part discusses the concerns of Administrators. Hence, this study identified the common and individual concerns of the two parties. With a better understanding of these areas, proper negotiations between two parties would be possible in the future.

Section 01

Theme 01: Need due recognition for student's voice

Students are the prime stakeholder in the higher education sector. Thus, their voice should be recognized, respected, and valued. However, the findings of the current study revealed that more than 90% of activists are not pleased with the given recognition. They strongly said that their voice is not heard. Activists believe, providing due recognition for their voices will create a better understanding among each other and ultimately it creates a healthy environment. Further, they expect that their opinions be considered in decision-making, particularly in student -related matters. One respondent said,

> *'We always bring fair-minded requests; thus, we need listeners for our concerns, not debaters' (An Activist)*

Not only in the local context but also, this situation is reported in the global context.

> *'In many cases, students are excluded from influencing decision-making in Higher Education Institutions (HEI)' (Huilman, et al., 2005)[11].*

The two generations involved in this event has different set of beliefs and values, thus the administrators need to identify the unique concerns of the other generation. Few past scholars, Quaye (2007); Danvers and Gagnon (2014); Mouffe (2000); Mager and Nowak (2012); cited by Garwe, (2017)[12]; in the same field of research have discussed the need of providing due recognition to activists' voice in HE sectors. According to Garwe,

> *'student voice in various forms including surveys, student representation, complaints, grievances, protests, and social media provides a useful quality assurance tool in the detection of shortcomings in the delivery of quality higher education'.*

Thus, the authors suggested administrators embrace student activism as a quality improvement tool. Further, *Harrison & Mather (2017)[10]* stated that the relationship between students and administrators should evolve from authoritarian to advisory. The administrators should help students understanding their values with greater depth and clarity, to integrate their core beliefs and values into their own complex set of ethics and priorities, even amid conflict or ambiguity (Jacoby, 2007)[13].

Many respondents pointed out that the administrators, including government officers, treat them as rebellions. Such a misconception about the entire student community of state universities has been generalized in Sri Lankan society. Students usually come up with demands like changing

modules, making amendments to curricula, improving the intakes, or enhancing welfare facilities; thus those demands should be heard with a fair mind. However, the activists complain that the government treats them as revolts and controls their protests using the armed forces. Therefore, the students suggest administrators treat them as young scholars. They are happy to see the administrators using a more humanitarian approach in resolving their issues. A similar observation has been given by the President's Commission on-Campus Unrest in the USA, (1970)[8] stating that some administrators and faculty members have responded indecisively during the student protests. The commission has observed that too many law enforcement officers have responded with unwarranted harshness and force in seeking to control disorder in the USA context. Comick (N.D)[14] has mentioned that it is important for adults to avoid a combative position with students as protesting is every student's right.

Theme 02: Need genuine mediation through open dialogs

Student leaders proposed to conduct regular discussions and create forums where they can openly raise matters. As per their view, the current system does not facilitate such forums until the issue becomes worst in every aspect. Many of the respondents have pointed out that discussions with key personalities are very rare. Even if the few representatives are allowed to participate in the board meetings, they are allowed to sit only for a limited time and the priority given is not adequate. They stated that the administrators should be genuine enough to conduct open discussions with them without having hidden agendas,

> *"It doesn't matter they agree with us or not; the concerns should be directly expressed during dialogs, without causing temporary breakdowns of our future union actions" (An Activist).*

This finding complies with some other researches too. Stone and Starkey (2011)[15] mentioned that some leaders in the higher education sector only pay lip service to student issues. Commick (N.D)[14] stated that improving knowledge about discussion points is highly important when approaching activists. Garwe (2017)[12] mentioned the importance of conducting conversations with students and he pointed out some strategies like GOAT and GOAL. Go-Out-And-Talk (GOAT) strategy, where administrators engage informally with students for a mind shift of students about the negative impact of civil disobedience. The next one is the Go-Out-And-Listen (GOAL) strategy where internal and/or external researchers carry out surveys/interviews/focus-group discussions to capture the feelings and opinions of students. Both strategies are useful in better understanding the concerns and thoughts of activists.

Theme 03: Need strong attention on student welfare

Many studies have found that welfare-related matters stimulate student activism in the Sri Lankan context. It was re-confirmed since more than 80 percent of the respondents mentioned that the administrators' attention on student welfare is not adequate. Activists complain that the administrators are not thoughtful about their duty of improving students' welfare. One respondent stated that;

> *'Administrators usually waiting for protests to take place; then only they start working on welfare' (An Activist).*

Thus, they suggested making continuous requests from the government for more welfare allocations in state universities. According to their view, a well-facilitated university environment can reduce the stress of students. Moreover, the results of the descriptive analysis showed that the most of students are resided in university hostels (for 70% of the sample), and therefore improving

facilities in hostels is very important to reduce students' unrest. Supportive literature was found from Garwe (2017)[12]. According to him, a fully resourced student affairs department covering all possible areas of welfare needs inclusive of sports, counseling, health, and well-being, accommodation, etc. can ease the students' life in universities. However, supportive literature is available only from developing countries. Because the activists in developed countries usually work against some ideological issues like racism, rule of law, etc. whereas poor welfare has been the prime reason behind activism in many developing countries.

Theme 04: Need flexible, transparent, and hands-on administrative strategies

Some of the suggestions under this theme may be unique to the Sri Lankan context. To strengthen the student's engagement in academic activities there is a compulsory attendance requirement in the Sri Lankan state university system specifically for the initial years of the degree. As per the findings of the current study, many activists claimed that the existing 80 percent attendance policy discourages them in engaging extra-curricular activities. They consider it a vital aspect of undergraduates' life. Activists criticized that they are not having adequate support from the administration when celebrating cultural events in universities. The students expressed their antagonism towards the administrators who are full of economic motives. Therefore, they expect some flexible conditions in rigid policies like 80 % attendance policy.

> *'Many clashes are initially occurred between students and university administration due to the conflicting interest on attendance policy' (An Activist).*

Due to this rigid policy, many students have lost the first sitting of examinations and as per the regulations, the later attempts will not allow them to keep maximum results though they have achieved. However, in practice, some universities have eased the policies informally. Anyway, this compulsory attendance policy has been a focal point where both parties cannot agree for a long time. Thus, demands a relaxed and unified policy for all state universities regarding attendance and they believe such equitable policies will yield more positive results in the case of activism.

Supportive literature was found from Goh & Abdul (2020)[16]. The authors state that the traditional, inflexible policies in the higher education sector are no more valid in the current environment. Instead, the administrators need to think of more innovative and flexible policies in dealing with student matters. Traditional methods of sticking students into classrooms for four years will not yield fruitful results. As they mentioned; *'Learning institutions of the future must move away from a learning environment which provides students with a predictable time frame of completion. Most universities now have a four-year duration. Instead, there must be flexibility in the time frame for students; for example, students should be 'life-long' learners, so that they can complete their degrees with different life experiences in a matured manner'.*
The Report of the President's Commission on-Campus Unrest in the USA, (1970)[8] has emphasized the need to maintain a clear code of action in each university. Also, Garwe (2017)[12] stated that well-documented and implemented policies on student engagement can help to handle student activism smoothly.

Further, students expect a higher level of transparency in administrative functions, especially when dealing with student union activities. According to activists, some students are suddenly suspended without being informed of their misconduct.

> *'Suspensions are made even for students who are not alive at the moment. Some of our friends' studentship was suspended, but nobody knows when, where and*

how he/she has done that offense. ***In addition, they usually take a lot of time to conduct inquiries.*** *Who accounts for the mental stress of suspended students until the inquiries are held? (An Activist).*

The above-mentioned US commission also stated that the university governance systems should be reformed to enhance its transparency towards stakeholders. Cormick (N.D)[14] mentioned that the presence of highly visible law enforcement in and around the campus is vital.

Moreover, many activists, particularly in social science disciplines claimed that they need changes in the existing curriculums. A considerable number of respondents have raised the point that the administrators are in a process of trimming the number of social science subjects, which are highly important in developing the moral and ethical aspects of people. Students mentioned that they have never been called for discussions regarding curricula changes as the primary stakeholders of the HEIs and their views are not considered when removing or including different subjects.

> *'We need the university curricula to be modified, but it should not be built on the increasing demands of the capitalistic world. It should be full of philanthropic subjects which ensure the knowledge on survival and betterment of all human beings' (An Activist).*

The importance of reforming existing teaching programs has also been highlighted by the above-mentioned US President's Commission on-Campus Unrest. The commission has urged that the university make its teaching programs, degree structure, and transfers and leave policies more flexible and more varied to enhance the quality and voluntariness of university study.

Theme 05: Need to avoid third party involvement in student union activities

Some activists stated that the government intentionally put some distinct strangers into the internal matters of universities as detectives. They secretly plug with student groups having some political agendas and create disorders in union activities. Since students formally present their union actions to the administrators, they believe that the administrators also can use such formal involvement from their standpoint. As commented by one activist;

> *'When we have a serious issue, usually we make both verbal and written requests to the administration and provide them with a reasonable period to solve it; if they are interested in solving it, they have more than enough time to discuss with us. If they seem to be silent over our requests, only then we do start our union actions. All information is formally informed to the administrators before the protest dates" (An Activist).*

Thus, the students quite hateful when administrators use secret agents in union activities. Therefore, students have no faith in administrative actions. The Report of the President's Commission on-Campus Unrest in the USA, (1970)[8] has come up with a similar idea. According to the commission, the academic institutions must be free from outside interference, and free from internal intimidation on student activities. Moreover, they have urged the universities to remain politically neutral.

Theme 06: Need more energetic but sensitive mediators

Some respondents have claimed that there are no professionally qualified, energetic mediators or counselors in universities to deal with student issues. As per some respondents, the disciplinary inquiries are sometimes conducted very unprofessional manner. Activists believe that some

representatives of those inquiry boards are not deserved to hold such positions. As mentioned by an activist;

> *'So-called Marshals (disciplinary officers in state universities) are the worst group who don't have any sense about feelings and behaviors of youth' (An Activist).*

> *'Many union actions would not have been such serious ones if we had more caring and sensitive people to convey our matters; unfortunately, in many cases, we saw only the positions who came to govern us influentially (An Activist).*

For this reason, they expect suitable mediators to deal with activism in terms of professionalism and sensitivity. A comparable idea has been given by Cormick (N.D)[14] stating that identifying key teachers who have a positive rapport with students in facilitating student issues is needed. He has further stated that administrators should try to summon some members of the community and agency members, including law enforcement, who are student-friendly and experienced, to support their efforts toward developing a plan and activities that would include appropriate methods of protest with the greatest efficacy.

The following section summarizes the recommendations given by administrators.

Section 02:

Theme 01: Enhance democratic governance in disciplinary committees

Handling student activism in universities is a collective task. When the cases are raised or likely to raise, the disciplinary committees gather and take collective decisions. However, respondents in some state universities said that they do not have adequate autonomy to deal with activism. As noted by one respondent,

> *'We are just nominal committee representatives who can say only 'Yes' or No'. Though we represent several committees, our insights are not taken into account often, we can just explain them situations, that's only' (An Administrator).*

Also, one more respondent in another university added that;

> *'We have no enough power to implement our decisions in emergencies during activism. If we do something based on contingency requirements, those actions are usually criticized or later blamed. The decisions taken by the committee chairpersons are not practical sometimes, in the past we have lost our dignity in front of students by implementing those decisions taken by autocratic leaders (An Administrator).*

Therefore, it can be suggested to enhance democratic governance in university disciplinary committees and take the opinions of ground-level officers when making decisions. Also, it is required to let the relevant officers make critical decisions and act freely in urgent situations. If the committee representatives are questioned by the top management about their actions and decisions every time, officers will resistant to take prompt actions. Therefore, no genuine mediations would be possible among the administrators when the absence of democratic governance in dealing with activism.

> *'There are some occasions where some administrators behave as autocrats even in public-funded state universities, but if we want to resolve students' issues we should first avoid such situations'- (An Administrator).*

Also, some respondents pointed out the need of considering students' voices when making some decisions. Student participation in committees should be enhanced at all levels and their ideas should be heard.

> *'We are not the one who utilizes the majority of welfare facilities in university; think of canteen; so, why can't we get the participation of student leaders when opening tenders of cafeteria service providers?' we should promote their participation even in technical committees. Then they feel like more engaged with the system' (An Administrator).*

Theme 02: Enrich two-way communication

Many of the respondents emphasized the importance of proper two-way communication when dealing with activism. They also suggested strengthening the information distribution system in universities. According to them, several complaints are recorded about the non-awareness of students on newly introduced circulars, rules, and decisions. Therefore usually, students tend to violate them. Some administrators told that there are communication gaps in universities. Therefore, it is required to communicate ideas properly to avoid misunderstandings between two parties. Furthermore, students need to be properly informed about the delays in the government system when handling welfare issues. Frequent updates regarding the work in progress of welfare provisions would be useful to avoid unrest among activists.

> '*Student activists should be informed about delays in tender procedures and procurement processes by the administration, which enhances understanding between the student and administrators' (An Administrator).*

This finding is complying with Garwe (2017)[12]. He has stated that it is necessary to explain to the students why some of their requests cannot be met. Also, he further emphasized the necessity of building favorable relationships with student activists to improve understanding and trust among the two parties. Similar kind of findings was found from a study conducted in the African context too. As noted by Facko and Malau (1995)[17], activism should be understood within a broader framework of democracy. Student affairs should be handled within the university through administrative structures designed to facilitate the regular expression of grievances and mechanism provide solutions.

Theme 03: Discourage self-centeredness of mediators

There was a criticism that some administrators are not genuinely involved. Therefore, the respondent's suggestion was to discourage such self-centeredness of mediators and select people as the mediators who truly sense this issue. As pointed out by a respondent, who had more than fifteen years of experience handling activism,

> *'If I tell you the real story, many student mentors and counsellors keep their positions to earn points for their promotions, otherwise, they will not take those voluntary positions'. To further state, confirming his opinion he added that; many state university administrators are from lower or middle-income families who have benefitted from the free education policy. In their past, they have gone through many hardships, and once they get a certain social status, now they try*

> *to enjoy in that comfort zone; such a group of people does not have a real interest*
> *to resolve student issues' (An Administrator).*

The same idea was heard from several other respondents; as noted by another respondent;

> *'I don't think that the mediators are interested in solving the issues of students,*
> *they just do it as completing another assigned duty. If we want to handle them*
> *successfully, of course, we have to find the correct people first! (An*
> *Administrator).*

However, no supportive or contradictory literature was found regarding the above judgment of the current study. This may be a unique and subjective judgment, which is based on the personal qualities of each mediator. In addition, this may be sometimes true, yet can not be generalized, since the majority of mediators in the Sri Lankan context are non-paid volunteer people.

Theme 04: Avoid conflict of interest among administrators.

Many respondents said that there is a conflict of interest among the members of committees who deal with student activism. The conflicting views among administrators affect the decisions on activism. As noted by one respondent,

> *'Before addressing issues of students, we need to be on a common standpoint;*
> *otherwise, different parties may use different approaches whereby students keep*
> *their trust on nobody' (An Administrator).*

Also, they stated that the mechanisms should be commonly agreed and approved by the administrators before applying them to control student activism. The literature also pointed out the importance of keeping the consistency of disciplinary actions. Administrators need to deal objectively with students in different faculties and departments so that many internal conflicts can be avoided.

Theme 05: Apply a friendly approach in dealing with activism

Some respondents revealed that there should be a close tie with student activists and it is not adequately considered at the moment. As noted by one respondent,

> *'We should not apply the concept of 'governmentality' when approaching*
> *students; instead, we need to be friendly with them as much as possible. As adults,*
> *we must welcome them for dialogs every time (An Administrator).*

Also, as per the views of many respondents, administrators usually rely on existing regulations and protocols when dealing with activism. None of the respondents pointed out weaknesses or inadequacies of existing rules and regulations to deal with activism; however, they mentioned that they have to go beyond rules when it is necessary. One respondent stated that;

> *'No rule is yielding same results every time, instead, we may have to apply some*
> *humanistic approach to deal with activism; though they are adults, we should be*
> *able to look at them as our own children (An Administrator).*

When contrasting the finding with the literature it is noteworthy that Jacoby (2007)[13] has mentioned that addressing student activism is essentially crucial today since the millennial generation is unique in many aspects, thus we need to approach them with a pleasant mode. Also, Jacoby (2007)[13] has said that the administrators' role as supporters for student activists is more important than ever. Rather than applying the fixed, rigid rules in all the cases, administrators should consider other available options for handling activism.

> *'Sometimes, highly informal friendly approaches would work than to the fixed*
> *rules and regulations. Therefore, we should be more flexible' (An Administrator).*

Also, Cormick (N.D)[14] stated that it is important to avoid antagonistic behavior towards students. According to him, administrators should quickly research the issue via news articles, the internet, legislation reviews, and interviews with key staff, law enforcement, and students to better understand students' perspectives regarding the issue.

When concluding the proposed strategies, the common and unique concerns of both parties can be summarized as given in table no. 03.

Table 3
Summary of suggestions of activists and administrators

	Student Activists	Administrators
Due recognition for student's voice	*	
Democratic governance in disciplinary committees		*
Strong attention to student's welfare	*	
Flexible, transparent and, hands-on administrative strategies	*	*
No third party involvement in student union activities	*	
More professional and sensitive mediators	*	
Enrich two-way communication	*	*
Discourage self-centeredness of mediators		*
Avoid conflict of interest among administrators		*
Apply a friendly approach in dealing with activism	*	*

Source: Field Data, (2019 and 2020)

Conclusion

Student activism incurred a huge cost to society. Even though the administration has taken various actions to weaken student activism in the state university system in Sri Lanka, the intensity of activism was growing throughout the past decade. Hence, this study identified that smooth handing of activism is essentially important before the situations become worst. Such an environment is only possible with the proper understanding of the concerns of both students and administrators. Therefore, this study has discussed the considerations of both parties, and strategies were identified based on their perspectives. Two-Way communications, flexibility in mechanisms, humanistic approaches, more participation are the concerns where both parties are well thought out. Therefore, such areas should be seriously taken into consideration. And the unique considerations of each party need to be further discussed by taking both parties into one table. The researcher faced difficulties when conducting interviews with respondents due to their hesitation to reveal the exact situations in the current context. Therefore, this study possesses a limitation of trustworthiness of data. Avenues for future research could be suggested to conduct the same study with a more effective method like focus group discussion where both parties get together.

References:

1. White, L. (2003). Protests, Activism, and Student Riots. Annual Conference on Legal Issues in Higher Education. The University of Vermont, October 5-7, 2003.

2. Samaranayake, G. (2015). Changing University Student Politics in Sri Lanka: From Norm Oriented to Value Orient Student Movement, *Social Affairs: A Journal for the Social Sciences*, 1 (3), 23-32. Retrieved from, http://www.worlduniversityfriends.org/Achive/Fall_2015/3_SAJ_1(3)Samaranayaka.pdf

3. University Grant Commission. (2012). *University Student Charter.* Sri Lanka

4. Kumari, M.S.D., & Fernando, R.L.S. (2020). *Determinants of student activism and implications for state university administration in Sri Lanka*. Manuscript submitted for publication

5. Burgess, P.M., & Hofstetter, C.R. (1971). The Student Movement: Ideology and Reality. *Midwest Journal of Political Science*, 15(4), 687–702. Midwest Political Science Association.

6. Janc, J. (2004). The meaning of the student advisory board leadership development experience to the student board members, *Faculty of the Graduate School,* University of Maryland

7. Weeramunda, A.J. (2008). Socio political impact of student violence and indiscipline in universities and tertiary education institute, National Education Commission, Sri Lanka. Retrieved from, http://nec.gov.lk/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/Socio_Political_impact_on_the_students_and_staff.pdf

8. President's Commission on Campus Unrest. (1970). *The Report of the President's Commission on-Campus Unrest.* Washington, D.C., US. Accessed online; https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED083899.pdf?fbclid=IwAR1OYAUxWVXtSsUbSHlCO67UY0VLqfMz9VgUXpfwLm12RhWVNEUhD-ThbLM

9. Mouffe, C. (2000). The Democratic Paradox. New York, NY:Verso

10. Harrison, Laura and Mather (2017). Making Meaning of Student Activism: Student Activist and Administrator Perspectives. *Mid-Western Educational Researcher*, 29 (2), 117-135.

11. Huilman, B., Carwile, L., & Barnett, K. (2005). Student Activists' Characterizations of Administrators in Higher Education: Perceptions of Power in "the System". *Review of Higher Education: Journal of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, 28*(3), 295–312. https://doi.org/10.1353/rhe.2005.0012

12. Garwe, E.C. (2017). Student Voice: Embracing Student Activism as a Quality Improvement Tool in Higher Education. In Renes S. (Eds.), *Global Voices in Higher Education*, Intech Open. http://DOI:10.5772/intechopen.68669

13. Jacoby, B. (2017). The New Student Activism: Supporting Students as Agents of Social Change. *Journal of College and Character*, 18 (1), 1-8. http://DOI: 10.1080/2194587X.2016.1260479

14. Cormick, J.M. (N.D). Suggestions for Management of Student Activism. *Effectively Channeling Student Activism*, Department of Education, Indiana

15. Stone & Starkey (2011). The possible impact of university corruption on customers' ethical standards. *Journal of Database Marketing & Customer Strategy Management*, 18 (3), 154–170. Online Available : file:///C:/Users/FMSC/Desktop/Stone-Starkey2011_Article_ThePossibleImpactOfUniversityC.pdf

16. Goh, P.S.C., & AbdulWahab, N. (2020). Paradigms to Drive Higher Education 4.0. *International Journal of Learning, Teaching and Educational Research,* 19 (1), 159-171. Online Available: https://doi.org/10.26803/ijlter.19.1.9

17. Fako & Molamu (1995). Reflections on managing student protest. South African Journal of Sociology, 26 (4), 109-115. DOI: 10.1080/02580144.1995.10432115