

Confronting challenges of recent changes in Sri Lankan higher education: The case of social sciences

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Abstract

This study describes some selected challenges of recent changes in Sri Lankan higher education in social sciences and how those challenges can be strategically addressed. There is a strong sentiment that universities in Sri Lanka are in a state of constant crisis, as rising demand for higher education is not being met, despite its growing importance on the sustainable development agenda. This criticism is predominately directed toward social sciences and humanities in higher education institutions, in terms of their relevance in the market economy. The mismatch between the needs of society and courses offered by universities has contributed to a high-level of graduate unemployment. A mix-method research approach method was employed in this research and both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The analysis of data indicates that challenges stemming from recent changes in social science education are often related to transformed and reinterpreted expectations of university education and about approaches to university education. Maintaining and improving quality of education, improving the relevance of curricula at a time of rapid change in the market economy, accommodating societal needs going along with dynamics of global higher education are some of those challenges leading to an unstable situation in the social science education unless strategically addressed.

Keywords: *Challenges of change, Higher education, Market needs, Reflections, Social sciences*

Introduction

There is a strong sentiment that universities in Sri Lanka are in a state of constant crisis (Amarasooriya, 2015; Udayanga, 2018) because the rising global demand for higher education is not met, in terms of its relevance and quality (Hill, Hoffman and Rex, 2005; UNESCO, 2015; United Nations, 2017). Once the 2030 agenda for Sustainable Development Goals was introduced as a global policy framework that should be ratified at local levels, higher education has become an important theme even for a knowledge economy (Altbach, 2011; Choo, Sawch and Villanueva, 2016), which can be employed as a viable strategy for the socio-economic development of the country (Mendis, 2012). Countries with a relatively higher GDP and those who allocate at least over four per cent of their budgets for higher education have been able to achieve that goal (Olssen and Peters, 2005; World Bank, 2020).

Higher education is an advanced stage of the life-long learning process, and UNESCO (2016) asserts that quality of life of people who are committed to fulfilling their own needs and the needs expected by the society can be realized only if they are given sufficient education which is appropriately organized and systematically planned. The early vision that higher education is committed for emancipation from narrow views of life has been changed over the past few years (Tilak, 2015), and now its vision has been directed toward entrepreneurial gains (Jibeen and Khan, 2015). It is, thus, believed that higher education should not be limited to providing knowledge, skills and attitudes so that students are prepared for their future life, but the ability to provide dynamic catalysts who are more adaptive to constantly changing modern world order has become a matter for concern in the contemporary global higher education trends (World Bank, 2018). Universities and other higher education institutions across the globe have, thus, captured this paramount requirement of the fast-changing global society and strived to incorporate potentially appropriate strategies into higher education, even though the developing world has yet to observe a significant success due to different reasons ranging from economic issues to culture bound malpractices (Yat, 2017).

Recently, articulated policies and strategies with regard to higher education by some of the funding agencies such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) have encouraged countries pay more attention to quality dimension of higher education, and compel to implement strategies such as strengthening market relevance and linkages with the development process; supporting Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) education, rethinking financing to improve equity and efficiency, and levelling up the playing field kind. Even BRICS¹, a newly established economic cooperation among five countries from the developing world, has also raised the importance of STEM education embedded not only in the school curriculum, but also in the higher education process which would facilitate acquiring expected development goals while reducing perilous social issues grounded in the developing world (New Development Bank, 2019).

Concern on social sciences in higher education has been decreasing as STEM gets prominence in the recent policy changes, even though some attempts have been made to incorporate social sciences in higher education because compromising social sciences for STEM education would cause unexpected challenges for students, (Lezaun, 2005; Yat 2017). Singapore, thus, has recently implemented a university (The Singapore University of Social Sciences) entirely dedicated to social science education, and it offers subjects more relevant to the contemporary needs of society (Gleason, 2018). However, the developing world still encounters challenges not only with regard to social science education but within the entire higher education process (Gopinathan, 2007).

Nevertheless, Sri Lankan higher education being at a crossroad, means the public spending on higher education is considerably minimum, while the education process is impaired as student politics are severely influenced by the country's leftist political parties that hinder the progress of university education (Gunawardena, 2017). On the other hand, internal rivalry among

1. BRICS - Five major emerging eco moves : Brizil, Russia, India, China, South Africa.

academics and administration, low quality of the academics, teaching and courses offered by universities particularly in the globalized market economy again cause the low quality of graduates (Senaratne, 2014). This would be a telling issue, as the job market would again question the credibility and suitability of those graduates when they seek jobs in accordance with their field of interests (World Bank, 2017). Nonetheless, the importance of social sciences has lost their prominent place within the university system since the ultimate objective expected from graduates has been transformed reflecting the changing societal needs, i.e., the objective of university education has now been transformed from emancipation to employability (White, 1997). This would challenge the place of social sciences, in spite of its vital contribution to the university curriculum and society.

Social science education is vital to higher education since it complements the hard sciences, in addition, it contributes to a harmonious and well-arranged society (UNESCO, 2013). The importance of the pure sciences and industry-oriented subjects has been elevated because of the recent industrial growth and government policy initiations, but they contribute only for technical purposes or more pragmatic needs of the society, though it does not completely fulfil the societal needs as the society requires healthier human relationships and emotional intelligence, which facilitate the social order (UNESCO, 2013). Despite its importance, social sciences seem to have been displaced from their earlier authoritative position to a corner even in the government policies in the modern higher education system (Senaratne, 2014). The place of social science has declined, while industry-oriented subjects are getting considerable attention from society and from the industry-public sectors. This might result in a crisis in higher education institutes that teach social sciences, in addition, the crisis would be severe in the faculties teaching humanities as the relevance of humanities in the industry-oriented society is substantially less.

Nonetheless, the importance of humanities is immeasurable in terms of heritage conservation, developing healthier human

relationships and perpetuating the identity of the country. Therefore, prioritizing the scientific and industry-oriented subjects by placing them at the top does not solely guarantee the expected qualities of a modern dynamic graduate who would be suitable in the industrial economy of the country. However, as the importance of social sciences decreases, particularly in the public-funded universities, this would cause some unexpected catastrophes in the entire higher education system (Udayanga, 2018). And hence, this paper analyses the challenges of recent changes in Sri Lankan higher education concerning social sciences and how those challenges can best be addressed.

Method

This research focuses more on qualitative data since it reflects the real-world experiences of different stakeholders in the higher education sector concerning the matters of social science education. Primary data were collected from in-depth interviews and focus group discussions. Secondary data were obtained from The University Grants Commissions (UGC) reports, UNESCO Institute of Statistics (UIS) data and The World Bank Open Data. Purposive sampling method was employed to recruit participants for the study (Table 1). Nine experienced-university-academics from different disciplines were interviewed (through online and face-to-face discussions), and two focus group discussions with students (from Social Science Faculties) were conducted. Furthermore, three human resource managers from private sector industries and two administrators from the public sector were interviewed. The in-depth interviews and focus group discussions focused more on understanding highly experienced academics' reflections upon their academic career and thoughts toward social science education. Focus group discussion with students revealed students' reflections on social science education. Collected data, thus, were analyzed thematically and supported them by descriptive statistics provided by different organizations above mentioned.

Table 1: Participants of the study (N=24)

Informant Index	Occupation/Status	Gender	Interview/ Focus Group Discussion (FGD)
1	Professor	Male	Interview
2	Professor	Male	Interview
3	Professor	Female	Interview
4	Professor	Female	Interview
5	Professor	Female	Interview
6	Professor	Male	Interview
7	Senior Lecture	Male	Interview
8	Senior Lecture	Male	Interview
9	Senior Lecture	Female	Interview
10	Human Resource Manger	Male	Interview
11	Human Resource Manger	Male	Interview
12	Human Resource Manger	Male	Interview
13	Student	Male	FGD 1
14	Student	Male	FGD 1
15	Student	Male	FGD 1
16	Student	Female	FGD 1
17	Student	Female	FGD 1
18	Student	Male	FGD 2
19	Student	Male	FGD 2
20	Student	Male	FGD 2
21	Student	Female	FGD 2
22	Student	Female	FGD 2
23	Public Sector Adminis- trator	Male	Interview
24	Public Sector Adminis- trator	Female	Interview

Sri Lankan higher education in social sciences

Even though university education is considered as an essential pathway that facilitates knowledge economy of a country to reach sustainable development goals, some changes of the entire higher education system in Sri Lanka are likely to damage the performance of the higher education process. When global values prevail and are accepted as valid norms by society, the pillars of higher education may change, resulting in some challenges that must be strategically addressed. One of the main challenges that the contemporary higher education in Sri Lanka encounters is changing the place of social sciences to accommodate market norms within the university curricular. Due to influences of industrialization, the place of social sciences within the university curricular has been critically questioned, as the extent to which the social sciences contribute to the economic development of the country is significantly minimum. Therefore, both the government and private industries encourage universities to produce globally competent graduates so that they can be employed. An increasing number of industries and growing attention toward entrepreneurship continuously demand innovative graduates with entrepreneurial qualities, though the capability of social sciences to inculcate those expected entrepreneurial qualities in the graduates are less as the driving philosophy of social science curricular is different from a market-oriented curriculum. This would transform the place of social sciences, and that could even challenge its existence.

“We do not need graduates with just the ability to memorize facts, but those who have a thinking capacity. Since we live in a globalized world, everyone should acquire at least a skill that can be employed, otherwise finding a job is difficult” (Interview 12)

“Recently our department decided to recruit social work graduates, but earlier we recruited sociology graduates. Now we have realized that when social work graduates are recruited, they perform better in their duty since they know how to perform professionally. Though sociologists are good, they do not have

professional training, so they could not perform better when compared to social work graduates” (Interview 23)

The growing awareness towards economic development of the country, and an increasing number of private-sector employment opportunities have signalled the universities to revise their curricular accommodating market needs, though social science academics could not face that challenge largely due to its inherent weakness to adjust with the market needs (Humanities and social sciences, according to interviews 03, 04, and 10, are intended to produce graduates with an emancipatory mindset rather than graduates for the market economy). However, private and public sector stakeholders have asserted the importance of teaching market-oriented subjects, and revising existing curricular so that it can accommodate rising expectation of private and public sector industries. Some of the social science subjects have been revised in accordance with contemporary needs, though a large number of subjects could not be adjusted in line with job market expectations. For example, applied sociology, social policy and administration have been introduced to the sociology curriculum in some universities (Table 5), though some have not even revised the decades-old curriculum.

Admission to public universities is more competitive since the undergraduate degree is offered free of charge. The University Grants Commission (UGC), therefore, administers the entire university system, including university admission, so that the students are given placements according to their performance in the Advanced Level Examination. Those who score high marks can request a placement at any university they wish, but the majority of the students are placed in universities by the UGC. There are seventeen UGC administered universities in the country, and their curriculum is different from each other, though they are based on Subject Benchmark Statements (SBMS). SBMS is provided by the UGC, but each university can ratify it according to their needs and specialities. Consequently, the manner of teaching and the content of the subjects might be different from one university to another, though the core area is common. This would again affect

Table 2: Number of students admitted to different undergraduate courses from 2012 to 2018

<i>Year of the Examination</i>	<i>Arts</i>	<i>Commerce</i>	<i>Physical Science</i>	<i>Biological Science</i>	<i>Engineering Technology</i>	<i>Biosystem Technology</i>
2012	7995	4966	5043	6129	NA	NA
2013	8227	5225	5228	6376	NA	NA
2014	8617	5299	5287	6316	NA	NA
2015	9891	5441	5374	6288	1130	721
2016	9481	5793	6023	7032	1215	857
2017	9923	6179	5787	6889	1309	958
2018	10400	6020	5707	7014	1361	994

Source: The University Grants Commission Statistics Book, 2020

the social science graduates, as some universities have revised their curriculum in accordance with market needs while some others have not.

Furthermore, societal needs, and the policy decisions made at higher levels are not parallel, in the sense, the increasing demand for industry-oriented subjects have not been given a sufficient number of placements, while a large or exceeding number of placements are allocated for social science studies (Table2 & Table3). Undergraduate enrolment for Arts (which includes social sciences, arts and humanities) is substantially higher at the rate of 29.7 per cent, which is double that of agriculture and medicine. Sri Lanka among many other Asian countries has been placed at the top in the enrolment rate for social sciences (Table7). This would be more problematic as graduates would not be employable in spite of having some social science knowledge which is not directly relevant in the industrial workplaces. The enrolment rate in the (G.C.E.Advanced Level) (in schools) in the social sciences has also been significantly higher than for other subject areas (Table 4). This trend continues to even postgraduate levels (Table 3).

Recently-developed countries such as South Korea, Singapore, and Hong Kong have revised their higher education system in accordance with the recent changes of the society (Yat, 2017). Sri Lanka, however, has failed to revise the admission policy in line with current needs. This is a serious issue since the UGC cannot intervene as student politics may damage the proper process of the university system by protesting at that discussion. In 2018, the UGC decided to reduce the number of placements for Buddhist Studies, but the decision was rescinded due to protests by the university students' unions. The crisis regarding social sciences initially emanates from the ineffective policies made at the UGC level, however blaming the UGC may not have a positive outcome because policy making at the UGC level has been highly influenced by political decisions.

Placement of social sciences in the market has been critically questioned by some social scientists. Even though it is difficult

Table 3: Undergraduate and Postgraduate Enrolment by Discipline, 2019

<i>Discipline</i>	<i>Undergraduate Enrolment</i>	<i>Share (%)</i>	<i>Postgraduate Enrolment</i>	<i>Share (%)</i>
Arts	30,867	29.7	6,339	15.5
<i>Education</i>	386	0.4	8,385	20.5
<i>Mgt & Commerce</i>	20,670	19.9	8115	19.8
<i>Law</i>	1,409	1.4	227	0.6
<i>Medicine</i>	6,583	6.3	} 4680	11.4
<i>Dental Science</i>	313	0.3		
<i>Veterinary Science</i>	302	0.3	96	0.2
<i>Agriculture</i>	4,937	4.8	1,360	3.3
<i>Engineering</i>	7,430	7.2	4,697	11.5
<i>Architecture & QS</i>	1,549	1.5	581	1.4
<i>Computer Science</i>	5,028	4.8		
<i>Allied Health Sciences</i>	2,410	2.3	2	0.004
<i>Science</i>	14,123	13.6	6,399	15.6
<i>Indigenous Medicine</i>	1,878	1.8	50	0.1
<i>Technology</i>	5,933	5.7		
Total	103,818	100	40,931	100

Source: The University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, 2020

to adjust social sciences in line with the modern requirements, new subjects have been introduced to the existing curriculum that would harness the graduates with some entrepreneurial qualities. However, this is not common to all the universities.

“Social science is the heart of the entire university system, and without social sciences, university education is worthless. That liberates the graduates from the wrong world visions so that their emotional intelligence quotient is good. We need graduates with soft skills as well as hard skills. Social sciences provide soft skills to graduates, therefore, they can work at any place in harmony.”
(Interview 01)

“Some lecturers from Faculty of Social Sciences have been appointed to those positions even without qualifications. They lack good command in English; sometimes, they do not have even a proper postgraduate qualifications. Therefore, it would be difficult to revise the curriculum since those people would indirectly or directly be reluctant to do it. They seem to fear as though they would lose their jobs soon after introducing new subjects to the curriculum” (Interview 06)

“Even in the Senate (the highest academic body of a university) meetings, social sciences and lecturers who teach social sciences are belittled. When funds are allocated, Social Science Faculties get a small piece of the cake when compared to other disciplines”
(Interview 09)

There is a sentiment among non-social science academics that social sciences and humanities are not taught well in the university system. When policies are made at the university level, many academics (who represent science, engineering, medicine, agriculture and technology facilities) sometimes raise their voice over social scientists representing the internal politics within the university. This is particularly because of the lack of a good command in the English language of social scientists in the university system when compared to other academics. Since higher-level meetings at the university level are conducted in English medium, that would overpower the voice of social science academics. The interview 05 shows:

“Policy discussions at the Senate level are held in English, and social sciences and humanities are frequently underrepresented. The senate is an academic body composed of professors, deans, directors, and department chairs. There are fewer professors in the humanities and social sciences, resulting in a low representation of these disciplines. Many social scientists do not actively participate in policy discussions due to a lack of command of English.”

Furthermore, the sentiment among social science academics is that the universities should not act as an industrial organization that produces goods, but a dynamic place which facilitates students to liberate from narrow views of the world in which they are supposed to live. This ideology strongly damages its place in the market economy.

The claim for teaching and giving prominence to social science has been widely accepted over the history of Sri Lankan higher education. This ideology, however, is no longer acceptable in the modern-day, as social science alone cannot guarantee the employability of graduates. The current practice in the university system is to offer social science degrees separately so that an interdisciplinary approach to higher education has been decreased. Some faculties, including management, medicine and engineering adopted the interdisciplinary practice, though as yet social science faculties have not initiated it. For example, the Faculty of Engineering in the University of Ruhuna established an interdisciplinary Department which teaches some subjects in social sciences and humanities, along with the main discipline. The department is facilitated by experts from different faculties. Although, interdisciplinary collaboration is far more convincing, there are some obstacles identified within social science faculties as to how interdisciplinary collaboration would be incorporated. Interdisciplinary approaches can integrate knowledge and methods from different cognate disciplines and encourage collaborative effort from different disciplines, each drawing on their disciplinary knowledge.

Table 4: Student Distribution (New Syllabus), by Discipline Groups, 2019

Discipline Group	GCE A levels	Number of students	
		admitted to universities	University Undergraduate Enrolment (%)
Arts	77774	10,400	32.6
Bio Science.	46237	7014	22
Physical Sciences	32304	5707	17.9
Commerce	54334	6020	18.9
Engineering Technology	13930	1361	4.3
Biosystem Technology	9452	994	3.1
Other	5456	385	1.2

Source: Department of Examinations, 2019

Some universities have strived to incorporate in the social science faculties, and that appeared to be more effective (Table 5), though incorporating non-social sciences is problematic. Faculties of medicine in universities of Sri Lanka provide an opportunity for their students to learn sociology, psychology, public administration, community development and some other social sciences and humanities because it complements medical education when they work in society. Social science graduates, on the contrary, do not involve adequate complementary set of skills which would be more useful once they graduate, since the allocation of time for some market-oriented subjects is considerably less within the given course work system (credit framework). Nonetheless, some universities have incorporated fewer number of courses having a market value in the social science curricular, though that does not provide a sufficient amount of knowledge for the students.

Table 5: Newly added subjects to the sociology curricula in different universities

University	Introduced Subject
<i>University of Peradeniya</i>	Applied Sociology, Social Policy and Administration, Participatory Research and Development, Sociology of Computing
<i>University of Ruhuna</i>	Organizational Management, Proposal Writing and Workshop Planning, Sociology of Counselling
<i>University of Colombo</i>	Social Work stream for sociology students
<i>University of Jaffna</i>	Refugee Studies, Peace studies- Concepts and theories, Critical Studies in Mass media

Source: Sociology curricula in mentioned universities (2019)

Lack of collaboration with the industry sector and the public sector is another challenge the social science academics encounter. The industrial sector often seeks graduates who are competent to work in an industrial environment that requires technical knowledge more than that of social science knowledge, and hence industrial organizations are more likely to have collaborations with faculties offering industry-oriented degrees. As the contribution of social sciences for industries is considerably less, there is a deficit in collaboration between industry sector and social science faculties. Even though some of the social science related subjects would contribute to the industry sector in different dimensions, still the collaboration with industries is minimum.

“We allow students to engage in internship activities, but opportunities are more competitive as the place for social science students is much less. As a part of the degree programme, we are supposed to include an industrial training programme, which would provide an opportunity to practice learned theories practically in the real environment, but most of the time, we deal with NGOs as now we have partnerships with some NGOs providing social work support for the people” (Interview 05)

Recent policy initiatives have strived to make collaborations with Non-government Organizations (NGOs) because social science related subjects are more relevant in the achievement of their missions. An increasing number of Non-government organizations provide social science graduates with opportunities to work with the community and social development, though the partnership among university students, academics and those organizations is noticeably minimum. However, when the NGO sector prevails in the country and overseas, there is an increasing demand for social science graduates as they are sufficiently suitable to work with communities appropriately. Nevertheless, the policy makers at the university level have not captured this tremendous opportunity.

Furthermore, vernacular higher education has constricted social science education only, in the sense the medium of instruction

employed when social sciences are taught is Sinhala or Tamil (Mother tongue). All the other subjects are offered in the English medium, so that those who are graduated in disciplines other than social sciences and humanities are highly likely to be employed, because of the English language proficiency (Senaratne, 2014). Some universities conduct social science subjects in English, but a small number of students follow degree programmes in the English medium. They are sometimes more employable than those who follow the degree programme in their native language.

“Since we are learning in English, we can at least find a job in an embassy or a private company. However, we know that finding a job that pays enough wage is quite difficult for the students learning in Sinhala medium. In the end, the knowledge does not matter, but it is language proficiency that matters.” (FGD 1, Student 17)

Some attempts have been made to deliver lectures in English medium; but the focus toward teaching through English language has been problematic, as learning in a non-native language sometimes has contributed to the decreasing quality of graduates. The lack of command in English of the majority of the teachers in the faculties of arts and social sciences in several universities is largely responsible for this situation, and it has produced graduates with a poor professional and working knowledge in English. (Figure 1 and Figure2). The proficiency in English is an essential requirement for both private and public sector organizations so that the lack of command in English is likely to decrease the value of the degree offered to social science graduates; consequently, the unemployment can be increased (Figure 2). Figure 1 shows that a good command in the English language is important in securing an employment opportunity, and Figure 2 shows that students with a good command in the English language are more likely to secure employment than those who study in Sinhala or Tamil, even within the social sciences and humanities stream.

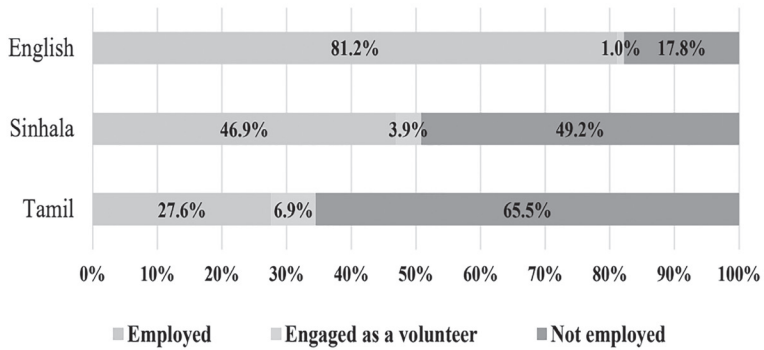


Fig. 1: Employment Status by Medium of Instruction - State Universities

Source: Tracer Study of Graduates in universities of Sri Lanka, (University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, 2018)

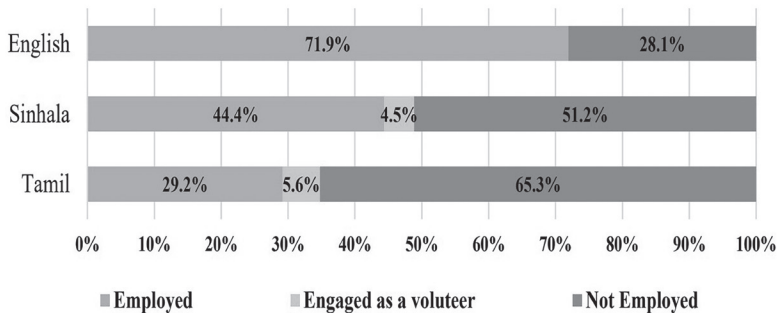


Fig. 2: Employment Status by Medium of Instruction – Social Science and Humanities Stream

Source: Tracer Study of Graduates in universities of Sri Lanka, (University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, 2018)

One of the other telling challenges is the low level of funding for research, scholarship and foreign exposure in the faculties of social sciences which hinders its contribution to society. When the budget is prepared by the UGC, considerably less amount of money is allocated for social science researches (Fernando, Hemachandra and Muthulingam, 2018; University Grants Commission of Sri Lanka, 2020). On the other hand, scholarships for academic staff and students are rare which is further hindered by their lack of English knowledge. Proficiency in English has been considered requirement for international scholarships, though many of the academics do not possess a good command in English.

“Students and young academics who fail to pass the IELTS examination are ineligible for a number of scholarship opportunities. Consequently, their motivation to conduct additional research may be diminished.” (Interview 04)

Foreign exposure provides academic staff with an ability to perceive the current placement of their engagement in the discipline with a wide world-view that would harness the quality of degree programmes and the quality of graduates. Since lack of foreign exposure with the staff members in the arts stream (that includes social sciences, humanities and arts) hinders the advancement of the subject, which in turn would cause the decline of the quality of degree programmes to a greater extent. In addition, many lecturers have obtained their postgraduate qualifications locally, so that it would be difficult to strengthen international partnerships with foreign universities and academics. Although convincingly, a sufficient number of PhD holders remain at the Arts, Humanities and Social Science faculties, most of them are about to retire from the service very soon.

“The presence of PhD holders in academic departments is a key indicator of the good performance of higher education. However, I have observed in recent years that faculty members in the humanities and social sciences are completing their PhDs very late in their academic career. Some are nearing retirement. From an instructional standpoint, obtaining a PhD at age 45 or 50 is not a commendable accomplishment.” (Interview 07).

Table 6: Distribution of teaching staff and their educational qualifications by different disciplines

<i>Academic Discipline</i>	<i>1st Degree & Postgraduate Diploma</i>		<i>Master Degree</i>		<i>MPhil Degree</i>		<i>Doctoral Degree</i>	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
<i>Medicine</i>	120	16.4	31	4.2	42	5.7	150	20.5
<i>Engineering</i>	128	20.4	111	17.7	36	5.7	352	56.1
<i>Management Studies</i>	167	21	376	47.3	25	3.1	227	28.6
<i>Arts & HSS</i>	198	13.5	416	28.4	313	21.4	356	36.6

Source: *UGC Statistics Book, 2019*

In addition, compared to other faculties, the percentage of the PhD holders are considerably low in the Arts and Social Science faculties (Table 6).

Table 7: Higher education enrolment by discipline groups, in selected Asian countries 2019

	<i>Humanities and Arts</i>	<i>Science, Engineering, Manufacture, and Construction</i>
<i>Sri Lanka</i>	49.7	17.2
<i>Kore, Rep.</i>	18.2	35.2
<i>Singapore</i>	9.4	40
<i>Malaysia</i>	8.5	34.8
<i>Thailand</i>	7.4	18.2
<i>Vietnam</i>	5.7	23.6
<i>India</i>	5.6	38.8
<i>Indonesia</i>	0.5	24.2

Source: UNESCO Institute of Statistics(UIS), (2019)

Though the contribution of social sciences is important to the society, the societal requirements must be matched with the policies regarding discipline management, in the sense that more demanding subjects shall be given prominence, but not compromising the social sciences. India, Malaysia and South Korea have revised their policies in order to accommodate recent societal needs in their university curricular. Consequently, the number of students who are recruited to the Arts stream has declined substantially (Table 7), though Sri Lanka still provides a prominent place to social sciences over other disciplines, that would indirectly hinder the progress of social science education too.

Furthermore, the decreasing enthusiasm and increasing frustration of students in the social science faculties is another challenge. Since the sentiment that though they learn hard, at the end, finding a job would be difficult. This decreases the enthusiasm of students to engage in academic activities, which causes the frustration of students and that sometimes contribute to the protest movements within the university system.

“We understand that finding a job will be difficult because what we learn is not directly related to the job market. We came to university with the intention of succeeding, but we quickly realized that finding work would be a difficult task. As a result, our desire to learn has decreased” (FDG 1, Student 16)

“Many students do not attend classes because they are working part-time. These students are easily influenced by protest moments” (FDG 2, Student 22)

Focus Group Discussions show that the participation of the students from arts faculties (including social science and humanities) in different universities in protest movements is considerably higher than those who are from non-arts faculties. Therefore, self-motivation among social science learning students for their academic activities seems to be demeaning, which would be harmful to them even after they have graduated.

Challenges and implications

This research was endeavoured to find out challenges with regard to social science education in the university system in Sri Lanka. Reflections of the study implied that separating social sciences from the other disciplines would demean its value in the contemporary society, and hence an interdisciplinary approach should be implemented in order to elevate the quality of graduates. On the other hand, double degree programmes can be implemented specifically for social science faculties. This requires strategic planning and effective policy reforms.

Graduate students can be encouraged to follow social science degrees alongside some other market-oriented subjects. For example, the University of Harvard encourages Sociology postgraduate students to work with public policies so that once they graduate, the knowledge acquired through sociology could be employed even in the public administration. Surprisingly, there is a low-level of collaboration even within social sciences in Sri Lanka. Therefore, universities should consider to incorporate different subjects within the social sciences with a carefully planned graduate profile. For example, the undergraduate dissertation can be collaboratively supervised (Sociology and Public Policy/ Psychology and Buddhist Studies). Moreover, building collaborations with NGOs, industries and public sector organizations is very important, since universities can get help from them to provide industrial training for the students. collaboration with foreign universities would be another possible strategy that would decrease the crisis in social science education.

Conclusion

Social science stream is an important subsection in higher education since it contributes to the inculcation of soft skills in the graduates. Both soft skills and hard skills are equally important, in the sense that a solely single aspect does not guarantee the quality of the graduates. Despite its importance, there are several issues in social science education, particularly in the public sector universities, Alongside the social change, the expectations of higher education are being changed tremendously, while accommodating contemporary societal needs in their curriculum. The increasing demand for graduates who would be employed in the industry sector is likely to diminish the place of social sciences in higher education in Sri Lanka. Several other obstacles analyzed above would support this, further.

Sri Lankan higher education concerning social sciences is in a state of crisis, because of several reasons that emanate from the process and structural dimensions of the higher education

Therefore revising the existing social science curricular must be the highest priority, but this has been procrastinated because of the academics' unpreparedness and internal politics. In addition, several other obstacles have been identified, which hinder the curriculum revision process with regard to social sciences.

Furthermore, the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration has prevented social science graduates from obtaining some other important skills essential for a market economy based society. Similarly, a smaller partnerships with private and public sector organizations delays the advancement and effective adjustment of the social science curricular. Sometimes, the low level of quality among social science graduates has been caused by the complexity of the Arts/ Social Science stream. It means that some of the social sciences are more relevant in the modern-day while some are relatively not so. Vernacular education, on the other hand, is constricted within the higher education only for social sciences and humanities that in turn would result in some unexpected problems. In order to address those issues, collaborative and strategic policy planning is needed.

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