



# UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY ON UNDERGRADUATES: SPECIAL REFERENCE TO FIRST-YEAR STUDENTS, TRINCOMALEE CAMPUS

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## Abstract

Sri Lanka is a multi-cultural nation in the world. People follow different religion and culture. And they are speaking different Languages. So, there is a “Cultural Diversity” in Sri Lanka. The country faced so many tragedies because of the ethnical and cultural conflicts. Diversity is about “Otherness”. Understanding, accepting and respecting other people. So cultural diversity means the same theory, understanding, accepting and respecting other’s cultures. The researchers have selected the Trincomalee campus’ 1<sup>st</sup>-year students for the data collection. Because in that Campus students are from multi-cultural societies. And there are latent and manifest level conflicts regarding cultural diversity. The researchers surveyed 100 students from the 1<sup>st</sup> year students in 2 faculties and 1 Unit from the campus. The result is positive regarding the understanding of Diversity and Cultural Diversity. They are willing to interact with other cultures and respect them. But in history, there have been some issues because of the poor understanding of cultural diversity. So before entering to the university, students know the cultural diversity. After entering also, they interact with others. But at the theory level, they have an understanding of cultural diversity. But in practice, the understanding of cultural diversity and the level of social harmony is not observable. So, in 1<sup>st</sup> year they have an understanding and clear knowledge regarding Cultural diversity. But there is a lack in 2<sup>nd</sup> year and the final years. As suggested, the undergraduates need the practice and guidance for cultural diversity and social harmony from 1<sup>st</sup> year to final in the Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University.

**Keywords:** *cultural diversity, social harmony, Trincomalee Campus*

## Introduction

### Diversity

The term “Diversity” cannot define easily. Because different scholars and researchers see that term from different points of view because of that the term diversity has various dimensions. “Diversity is differences among people concerning age, class, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, sexual orientation, spiritual practice, and other human differences.” – (Kathy Castania)

Diversity means understanding that each individual is unique, and recognizing our individual differences. These can include race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, age,



physical abilities, religious beliefs, political beliefs, or other ideologies.” – (Office of Equity and Inclusion Oregon Health Authority)

### **Cultural Diversity**

Cultural diversity means treating all cultures in an equal way. This term, people need sustainable development of individuals, communities, and nations. Respecting, protecting, and maintaining cultural diversity leads to building mutual understanding between and among people.

In our country, we have a multicultural society. In our society, we can observe multi-cultural and multi-religious backgrounds. We have a pathetic history of cultural conflicts and ethnic conflicts, because of the poor understanding of cultural diversity.

Cultural diversity helps to build communal harmony. But people have not been to create harmony with each other due to religion, ethnicity, caste, gender, socioeconomic and physical abilities, beliefs, and values of the cultures. Cultural exchange is very important to build a better society. Without exploiting the rights of cultural diversity, every human can be celebrated and help each other for a better future.

### **Cultural Diversity and the Trincomalee Campus**

In Sri Lanka, Trincomalee is a unique city. Because it is full of different cultures, religions, and ethnicities. The most important thing is people can live in relative peace. According to the 2012 census, 1,592,516 Muslims, 98,772 Buddhists, 98,133 Hindus, and 21,893 Christians are living (Daily News, 2018).

Meanwhile, the Trincomalee campus, it's a campus of the Eastern University of Sri Lanka. It has faculties with English medium courses. Because of the English medium, all the students can apply for enrollment. It is a special feature of the Trincomalee Campus that students of all religions, races, and castes are seen in every faculty in the university. Also, in all public works, festivals, and any other occasion, it is possible to see that everyone works as one regardless of race, religion, or caste. When we consider the contributions received in the festivals held on campus, during Vesak festivals, everyone gets together and creates Vesak lanterns. And everyone will come together and engage in charity. Moreover, when Hindu religious festivals are held, they are enjoyed by everyone regardless of caste and religion. Festivals like Sinhala and Hindu New Year, Diwali festival, and Christmas are celebrated very peacefully and beautifully on campus. All these things show the cultural diversity of the Trincomalee Campus.

The students also have to face cultural issues on campus. Due to the Sinhala – Elam civil war that lasted for thirty years, there was a division between Sinhalese and Tamil students on the campus. And Tamil



students were marginalized in front of the Sinhalese students. Because of these students had to face many difficulties. Moreover, due to the Easter attack in 2019, problems arose between Sinhala and Tamil students with Muslim students. There were times when they did not talk with Muslim students. They marginalized. So, in these 25 years, the Trincomalee campus is facing so many ethnic conflicts and cultural conflicts among the students. Because of poor understanding regarding cultural diversity and social harmony. In our country also we are facing so many ethical and cultural problems generation by generation. When we search for the base of the problems or the cultural issues. Those are worthless reasons. So, suppose they have the proper idea regarding cultural diversity and social harmony. In that case, we can avoid unwanted conflicts on the campus through that we can build social harmony in our country.

### **Social Harmony**

Social harmony is expressing and promoting generosity, peace, love, kind trust and etc. between and among people. This promotes equality and equity and causes high development in the country. Social harmony also develops peace, obeys the law, and respects the rights and freedom of people and the constitution. (Social Harmony for Being Social - By Mrs. Manisha Sharma). According to the dictionary meaning, “Harmony is a state of mutual agreement between different individuals where they live together peacefully without any conflicts.” In other words, it is an agreement between two people or among the members of the society where each person’s perspective is accepted. Sri Lanka is a diverse nation with millions of people. To make the country stronger and more developed, it is very important to maintain cordial relations among the citizens of the nation. Well, maintaining harmony is not the sole responsibility of one citizen alone, but if the same citizen tries to maintain harmony with people around him, it will generate a chain and a peaceful environment will be observed throughout the society.

### **Problem Statement**

Undergraduates are the people going to rule the country. But they are doing conflicts in their undergraduate periods in their university life. Trincomalee campus is a campus with multicultural students. In history, there are so cultural conflicts have occurred. So, the researcher is willing to analyze the understanding of the cultural diversity among the first-year students from all faculties on the campus. Because they are the people who entered the university with fresh thoughts regarding multicultural society.

### **Methodology**

It is a method of finding the outcome of a given problem with respect to a particular issue. Researchers use different points of reference to solve the research problems. Different methods are used to solve different problems (Industrial Research Institute, 2010).



### Survey Methodology

Social science methodology relies heavily on survey methods in its research endeavors, which have the advantage of having a large amount of information from a large population. It adopts to take person, social facts, and also attitude, and beliefs. It also said descriptive research is used to collect from a representative sample of the target population which is an indecorous tool for studying multivariate survey research methods. (Mathiyazhagan & Deoki Nandan, 2010)

In this research, the data was collected as mentioned below:

- 25 – 1<sup>st</sup>-year Communication studies students
- 25 – 1<sup>st</sup>-year Management Studies students
- 25 – 1<sup>st</sup>-year Faculty of Applied Science students
- 25 – 1<sup>st</sup>-year Unit of Siddha Medicine students

The questionnaire consisted of three parts. Namely, the respondent’s personal information, information resource method, and type of information received. Non-Random simply means it is a sampling process where samples are collected. So, all individuals in the population are not given an equal chance of being selected.

### Results and Discussions

For this research here we use the age of 21 to 24. So, for that 53% of students are the age of 21, 17% of students are in the age of 22, 25% of students are in the age of 23 and 5% of students are in the age of 24.

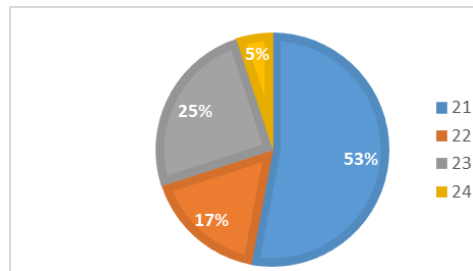
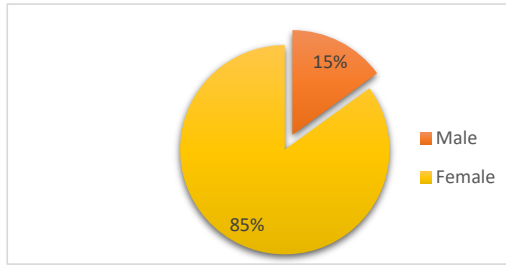
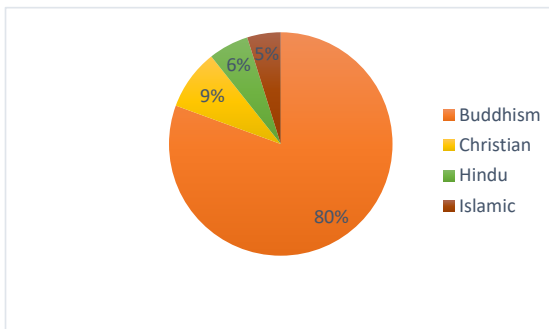


Figure 1: The Student’s Age



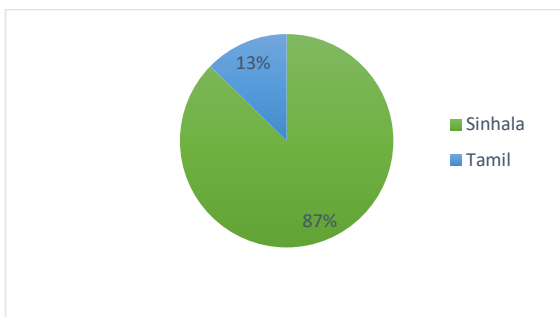
**Figure 2: The Student's Gender**

According to this study, 85.4% of female students responded, and 14.6% of male students responded



**Figure 3: The Religion of the Students**

Among all the respondents 80 % of the students are belonging to Buddhism, 9% of students belong to Christianity, 6% of students belong to Hinduism and 5% of students belong to Islam.

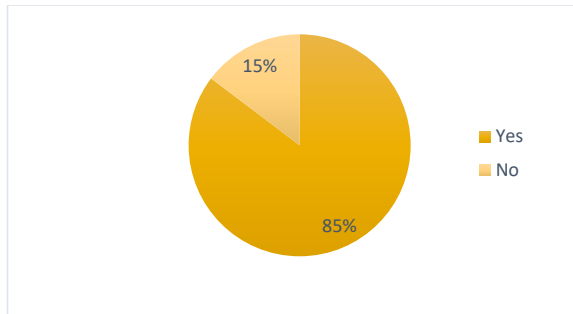


**Figure 4: Native Language of the Students**



According to the respondents, 87.3% of students speak the Sinhala language as their native language and 12.7% of students speak the Tamil language as their native language.

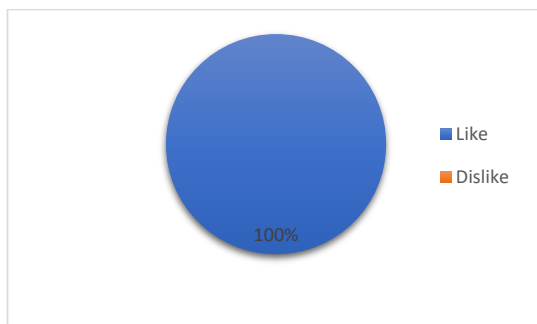
According to the respondents, there are 85.3% of students know the Cultural Diversity, and 14.7% of students do not know the Cultural Diversity.



**Figure 5: Do You Know the Term "Diversity"**

According to the student's understanding of cultural diversity, they explain differences in age, values, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic class and etc. And also, said that Diversity is a collection of individuals from different racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and cultural backgrounds.

According to the student's responses, Cultural diversity is about appreciating people, different interests, skills, and talents. Not only these things but also students respond that Diversity makes us as unique. That uniqueness includes our personal and professional lives, beliefs, family, and cultural backgrounds. Most of the students explain cultural diversity as having differences between different people, cultures, and nations. And also, a few students said that they do not know the term cultural diversity and do not know about that.

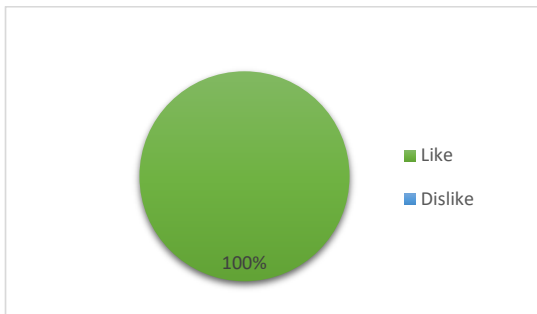


**Figure 6: Do you like to interact with multicultural people?**



According to the respondents, the reason for like multicultural people is that they can learn about different cultures and I like to respect everyone, so even if people's cultures are different, they humbly maintain relations with them as a human being and it connects with multicultural people and exchanges their knowledge, behaviors and their own unique customs. Some students with cultural diversity people develop language skills, have new thinking patterns, and new knowledge, and also people experience things in different ways. Most of the students give their answers as they are very interested in studying other cultures and can understand so many languages, things, religions, and cultural festivals. According to their answers, they said that by interacting with multicultural people they can create, develop, and sustain relationships.

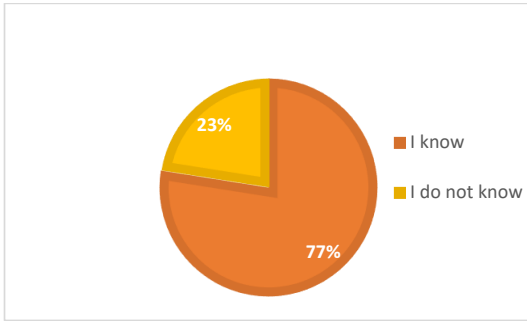
According to the respondents of students all the students like to respect other cultures.



**Figure 7: Do you respect other cultures?**

Among the students' respondents, they answered that they respect other cultures because they are the people like us, we all are human on the earth. We all are human beings. We all have privacy, so we don't want to harm that privacy. We don't mind other people's cultural differences; we respect human qualities that's why we have to respect other cultures. And also respecting cultures is important for the survival of society. Some students give their answer as an It's a common ethic, create peace, harmony, and love in society, we do respect all people through that we all should be friends, and We all have rights who live in society. other cultures are very attractive. They all are individuals so we can cooperate with them likewise. And the students said that if we respect other cultures, it creates unity between and among human beings.

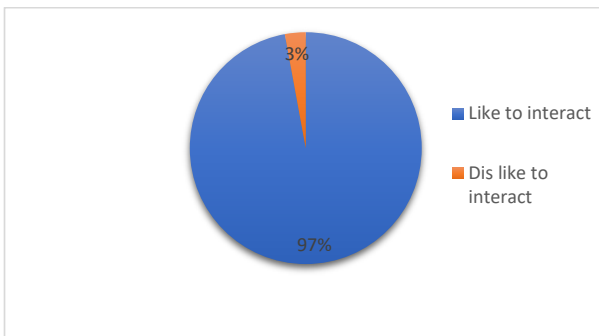
Among the respondents regarding their perception of social harmony, 77.5% of students said that they know social harmony and other rest 22.5% said that they do not know social harmony.



**Figure 8: What Is Your Perception Regarding Social Harmony?**

According to the responses, students said that knowing social harmony is sharing trust, love, care, kindness, and peace between and among people and treating people in an equal way. All people are equal through the social harmony created when people from different cultures live together and keep society peaceful. Most of the students said that social harmony means togetherness and avoiding social conflicts. And also, through harmony people can develop and sustain relationships effectively. Overall, the answers given by the students are that social harmony is good, important, and essential. Few students do not know about social harmony and do not have any perception of social harmony.

Among the response of students' perception regarding other cultures before entering the campus 97.1% give their answer as like to interact and 2.9% give their answer as not like to interact.



**Figure 9: What is your perception regarding other cultures before entering the campus?**

When we observe the perception regarding other cultures now students said that they respect other cultures, which is interesting and happy. And also said they love and like to learn about other cultures and work cooperatively and unitedly.

Among the responses of the reasons for their answers, they said all people are equal to each other there are no differences between their class, race, or ethnicity. We all are like a friend. And also said we could learn about their thoughts, knowledge, ideas, and other things. We live in a multicultural world because





of this if we have good perceptions regarding other cultures we can leave peacefully. Some students said that after coming to the campus, they were able to see many things from other cultures. Those things are very beautiful. Therefore, the desire to know about those things increased even more.

Among the all responses to the students of suggestions regarding understanding, respecting, and adapting to other cultures, most of the students said that it is good, valuable, important, and interesting. Also, they said we can get knowledge, and blessings about other cultures from understanding, and respecting other cultures. Not only these things but also, they said by increasing your understanding of cultural awareness, you can interact meaningfully with those around you. “Don't let your ethnicity or religion judge which people you are living with. Let your passion and love to decide which friends you choose”. The study mentions that most First Year students get to know about Cultural Diversity and Social Harmony. And they increase their knowledge after entered to the campus and studying Communication and Conflict Management subject.

### **Conclusion**

The study concludes that most First-year undergraduate students got more knowledge about Cultural Diversity and Social Harmony. And a smaller number of students did not know about Cultural Diversity and Social Harmony. All the students like to interact with multicultural people and have good perceptions regarding other cultures.

According to this study, all the students like to respect other cultures and the reason behind this through that respect for others can create unity between and among the people and it causes peace in the country. More than half of the students have the knowledge and they like social harmony and few have no knowledge and because of that, they dislike social harmony. Their opinion regarding social harmony is that it is interesting, essential, and important to societal peace. And they said that can reduce problems among the social group a large number of them expressed their willingness to interact with other cultures before entering the campus and very few expressed their unwillingness. But after entering the campus when they interacted with different cultures people eventually liked to interact with other cultures.

But when we observe the history of the Trincomalee campus, there are a number of big issues because of the cultural and ethnical conflicts. But when we are doing the study with 1<sup>st</sup>-year students, they are respecting other cultures. But in 2<sup>nd</sup> year and 3<sup>rd</sup> years, they are creating conflicts. In the syllabus, they have included the subjects Conflict management and social harmony. They are studying the subjects for educational purposes only. They are not following the theories in practice. In the suggestion part, the researcher can suggest that Undergraduates are the people going to lead the country in the future. So, they need special consideration regarding cultural diversity and social harmony. So from 1<sup>st</sup> year to



the final year, they need guidance and practice for cultural diversity and social harmony in Trincomalee Campus, Eastern University of Sri Lanka.

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