In South Asian countries, many tertiary education institutions face challenges in maintaining and improving student engagement.

The following document outlines strategies that these institutions can implement to enhance student engagement. The purpose of this article is to share the perspective of four prominent researchers on how to improve tertiary education levels with special reference to South Asian countries.

PERSPECTIVES FROM FOUR PROMINENT RESEARCHERS

HOW TERTIARY EDUCATION INSTITUTES CAN IMPROVE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT LEVELS IN S. ASIA?

VIEWPOINT OF PROFESSOR SANKAR SIVARAJAH

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For effective student engagement, Tertiary Education Institutes (TEIs) must adopt a holistic approach to the student experience, from enrolment to achieving successful academic and career outcomes. This should not be a mere 'tick box' exercise but a strategic effort to enhance student support, knowledge, and skill development. By viewing the student journey systemically, implementing effective interventions, and fostering a supportive institutional culture, TEIs can significantly improve student engagement and outcomes. Here are some key initiatives to enhance student engagement throughout their educational journey:

- **Student Access and Onboarding:** Providing pre-arrival support and initiatives that bridge the gap between secondary and tertiary education is crucial. These efforts help students understand the value of tertiary education and develop the skills needed for a smooth transition.
- **Student Community:** Creating an inclusive environment where students feel a sense of belonging is vital for active engagement. This can be achieved through the formation of relevant societies and extracurricular activities that foster a sense of community and encourage participation.
- **Student Success:** The ultimate goal is to help students achieve relevant career outcomes. This can include providing financial support for attending interviews or offering specific skills development workshops that enhance their career prospects.

By focusing on these areas, TEIs can ensure a comprehensive and engaging student experience that leads to successful academic and career achievements.

VIEWPOINT OF PROFESSOR KOKIL JAIN

Kokil Jain is the Dean Research and Outreach and Professor of Marketing, FIIB, New Delhi, India.

In an era where technology influences nearly every aspect of our lives, one promising approach for higher education institutions across South Asia to enhance student engagement can be gamified learning. This innovative method transforms traditional lectures into dynamic, challenge-based environments by integrating game-like elements into education. Incorporating features such as points, levels, and rewards into course design, gamified learning creates an immersive experience

Gamified learning offers several benefits - It enhances engagement by moving students from passive absorption to active involvement, thereby developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This approach appeals to today's tech- comfortable learner population, making knowledge acquisition for them more natural and enjoyable

that motivates students to engage more deeply with the disseminated knowledge.

Gamified learning offers several benefits - It enhances engagement by moving students from passive absorption to active involvement, thereby developing critical thinking and problem-solving skills. This approach appeals to today's tech- comfortable learner population, making knowledge acquisition for them more natural and enjoyable. Moreover, gamified learning platforms can adapt to individual learning styles offering personalised learning experiences that align to diverse student needs. This customisation is particularly important in South Asian countries, where classrooms often have students from varied educational backgrounds and experiences. By allowing students to learn at their own pace while competing with peers, 'gamification' fosters a collaborative yet competitive atmosphere that can drive overall performance improvements.

One of the key advantages of well-designed 'gamified' courses is their potential to help students acquire skills in high demand in the local job market, thereby boosting their employability and making 'gamified' learning attractive for South Asian TEIs looking to enhance the value of their educational offerings.

However, successful implementation of 'gamified' learning requires significant investment. The institutions need to focus on comprehensive teacher-training programmes to ensure educators are proficient in both the technology and teaching methods involved. Equally important is the development of robust technological infrastructure to provide seamless access to 'gamified' learning tools and promote uniform outcomes across diverse student populations. These investments are crucial for creating an equitable and effective learning environment that can transform higher education in the region.

While challenges remain, the potential benefits of 'gamified' learning make it an option worth exploring for South Asian higher education institutions looking to enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. As South Asian universities strive to modernise their teaching methods, 'gamified' learning emerges as a promising option. It not only keeps students engaged but also has the potential to develop essential skills, making it a valuable tool in preparing graduates for the challenges of the modern workplace. The journey towards fully integrating 'gamified' learning may be challenging, but its potential to transform higher education in South Asia makes it a compelling path worthy exploring.

The learner is changing with the technological transformation, so teachers need to adapt and update their knowledge of the state-of-the-art technological developments in education

VIEWPOINT OF DR. NIRMA SADAMALI JAYAWARDENA

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Tertiary education success depends on the student engagement. Student engagement is linked to higher academic performance and satisfaction. In South Asia, with the use of technology in higher education, we go beyond the use of new learning methods to project-based and problem-based learning as well. The learner is changing with the technological transformation, so teachers need to adapt and update their knowledge of the state-of-the-art technological developments in education. Because of the accessibility of information, students have become technologically savvy and autonomous, which also allows teachers to rethink their methods and techniques for teaching. As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, many aspects of business were affected, including the education sector. The challenging pandemic environment forced many Higher Education Institutions to shift to the online process and keep changing constantly to accommodate the changing environment. Even though, the move to online platforms by universities was an answer in certain fields; for example, there were limitations with regard to subject content requiring practical laboratory skills.

VIEWPOINT OF DR. ABHISHEK BEHL

Abhishek Behl is an Associate Professor, Keele Business School, Keele University, United Kingdom.

Tertiary Education and its growing enrolments in South Asia have attracted the attention of global colleges and universities. With growing number of students and improved infrastructure, the new age colleges have been using technology and new aids of learning to engage students. However, with growing investments in technology, what remains as a challenge is to understand that the cognitive learning ability of the student has also changed. While technology makes the life of the faculty and the student easier, the education pedagogy has not seen significant changes in student engagement. Off lately, some organisations have started to use game-based learning, activity-based assignments, and hands-on case studies rather than the contemporary format of learning. These techniques have added an additional layer of cushion while demonstrating what is perceived to be learning. However, it is not well received. The students have graduated from playing games to watching byte-sized videos, which is gradually transforming their engagement patterns. A significant size of the student base spends a significant amount of their time on channels like Instagram and Tik Tok, which poses a challenge for the faculty members and the institutions.

There are three key challenges. First, the learning becomes micro, and the students wish to switch to mediums that make them grasp information and learn in the shortest on-the-go format. Second, the students do not have a clear guideline of how to learn and what to learn, which further dips engagement. Last, too many choices confuse them, which often impacts their attention span when learning something specific for a long time.

The solutions to these problems are fourfold.

First, institutions and faculty members need to understand and adopt the psychology and accepted pedagogy of learning and move to the new format of learning, which also involves making the knowledge and information look simple and short. Second, adopting game-based and simulation-based approaches would also help in recreating the problem and shift the power dynamics of learning to students, which, at the moment, is more about the faculty in a classroom. Third, there is a need to develop design knowledge maps of learning aligned with career choices and options to make students aware of the path and the possible end goals. Lastly, the learning format should be more by doing rather than only understanding. A good example is using techniques like Lego Serious Play (LSP) that make the learning from a lean-back approach to a move-forward one.

Dr. Lorna Dewaraja's book 'The Muslims of Sri Lanka'

Muslims' role in Lankan politics and *the magnanimity of Sinhala Kings*

By
Rajitha Weerakoon

Sri Lanka's history of peaceful relations that had existed between the Sinhalese and the Muslims, stands as a contrast against the mass destruction taking place in the Middle East in the name of ethnicity and religion.

The late, eminent historian **Dr. Lorna Dewaraja**, whose insights of the close bonds that had existed between the two ethnic groups in Sri Lanka puts to shame the ongoing fighting states in her book **'The Muslims of Sri Lanka, Thousand Years of Ethnic Harmony 900-1915'** that "except for a riot that took place in 1915, caused by political and economic tension rather than a confrontation between Islam and Buddhism," the harmonious relationship that developed between the indigenous inhabitants and the Muslims, continued uninterrupted and they lived together peacefully for over a thousand years.

A **Vijitha Yapa Publication,** last printed in 2021, the author, encouraged by **Sri Lanka's first Foreign Minister, A.C.S. Hameed,** had dug deep into the roots of Muslims and makes the disclosure that the Muslim community never showed political ambitions of making conquests in Sri Lanka. This was "unlike in India, where Islam made its entry as a conquering, proselytizing force."

Circumstances did draw them into the political whirlpool and the author speaking of the roles played by the **Muslims** in the island's political history, discusses the magnanimity of Sri Lankan Kings who gave them the freedom to pursue their faith and trade which enabled them to be absorbed into Lankan society.

The Muslims, enjoyed a monopoly in the

Author - Dr. Lorna Dewaraja

jewellery, pearls, gems and spice trade until the unexpected arrival of the Portuguese in the island in 1505 that dealt a death blow to the peaceful exchange of commodities with the Sinhalese. This however, led them ultimately to participate in Lankan politics.

MUSLIMS AND KING OF KOTTE

"Even at the time of Portuguese landing," she states "a number of Muslim ships had been anchored in the Colombo harbour. Sensing trouble on finding that the Portuguese were erecting a fort, the Muslims had warned the King of Kotte – Parakramabahu 1X (CE 1489-1513) of the potential threat."

The King's attempts however, to oust the intruders with the help of the Muslims and the Malabars, had met with little success.

The Sinhalese, had always been essentially farmers. With caste prejudices, they were preoccupied with the cultivation of paddy lands while the Muslims as traders, did not come in the way of their occupation.

Problems commenced when the Portuguese who arrived in the island, discovered that the snag in achieving a monopoly of the profitable cinnamon trade was the presence of Muslims. This led to cause the rift between the Muslims and the Europeans.

The "Vijayaba Kollaya" of 1521 – a turning point in Lankan history, directly impacted on the trek of the Muslims from the coastal belt to the interior of the island. The Portuguese, who befriended Bhuvanekabahu V11 (CE1521-1551,) the new King of Kotte, persuaded him to expel the Moors from Colombo. Bhuvanekabahu, being afraid of his ambitious brother – Mayadunna (CE1521-1581,) the new King of Sitavaka and badly in need of assistance of the Portuguese, complied. The Moors as a result, taking refuge in the

Sitavaka Kingdom, rallied round Mayadunne, now confirmed as a nationalist leader. And to fight the Portuguese, they brought the forces of the Zamorin of Calicut which intensified the Portugese hatred of the Moors. And the bitter rivalry between the Christian power and the Muslims that prevailed in Europe, was vigorously pursued on the island.

Although Mayaduue and his son Rajasinghe 1 (CE1581-1592) carried on relentless warfare with the Portuguese, the political developments that followed sent Muslims further into the interior. Bhuvanekabahu's successor Dharmapala (CE1551-1597) bequeathed Kotte Kingdom to the King of Portugal. And with the death of Rajasinghe 1, the son of Mayadunne, Sitawaka was annexed to the Portuguese territory.

Having acquired the Kotte and Sitavaka kingdoms and with only Vimaladharmasuriya 1 (CE 1592-1604) the King of Kandy to deal with, the Portugese expelled the Moors from Sitawaka. They had also settled down in the port towns of Negombo, Puttalam, Beruwela and Alutgama.

HOUR OF DISTRESS

The attempted extermination of the Muslims by the Portuguese and later by the Dutch, commenced their infiltration to the **Kandyan** Kingdom from the Western Province where awaited a hearty welcome by the upcountry rulers especially that of King Senarat (CE 1604-1635.) Thus, the last bastion of independent Buddhism, became a haven for the Muslims in their hour of distress where they were allowed to practice their religion without hindrance from the Portugese. This commenced the indigenisation of the **Muslims.**

The Kandyan kingdom in turn, being denuded of manpower following the continuous wars, needed people to develop agriculture and strengthen the economy. Being traders, Muslims also had access to the Ports, links with the outside and therefore were knowledgeable on matters of the world.

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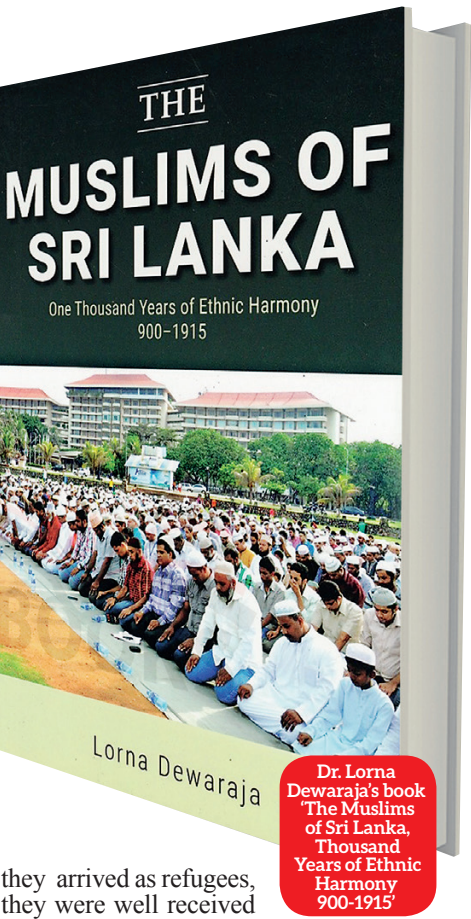
Muslim villages thus sprang along trade routes to Kandy and in the interior where Kings had given them grants of land.

Having encouraged the Muslims to maintain their links with the Islamic world, the King found them useful informants of international affairs. A state of harmonious co-existence as a result, unique in an era of religious persecution and rivalry, developed in Sri Lanka.

Arab authors have recorded that the Royal court of Sri Lanka was particularly noted for its religious tolerance. Idrisi in the 12th century had mentioned of a Council of 16 set up at the Royal Court consisting of 4 Buddhists, 4 Muslims, 4 Christians and 4 Jews. The interests of the rulers were closely integrated with those of the Muslims and hence the latter's advice was readily accepted. It is also possible, the author suggests, that the trade missions sent to the Arab world by the King was a cover to seek an alliance with the Muslim world to counter the constant threat of invasions from South India.

Dr. Dewaraja makes the point that the Muslims on their part, while rendering service, never attempted to arrogate political power on themselves. They were respectful of state authority and were sensitive to the susceptibilities of the Sinhalese. Hence, although

they arrived as refugees, they were well received at the Kandyan Court.

Queros writing of Senarath's action said **"in Batticaloa, the idolatrous king, placed a garrison of four thousand of them, thus showing his mind by favouring our enemy."**

Senarath's settling of the Muslims in the fertile lands around Batticaloa, resulted in the quick recovery of the kingdom following the invasions of 1628 and 1630. The largest rural Muslim settlements to this day are in the Batticaloa area and they have earned the reputation of being some of the best farmers in the country.

Particularly adroit at diplomacy, the King in turn, depended on their services with regard to information of foreign visitors who arrived at the Trincomalee port. With their linguistic fluency – being able to speak Tamil, some South Indian languages and even Portugese, they kept the King well informed of trade and power politics operating globally while acting as virtual ambassadors. The author's findings during her research include a few Muslim families in the Kandyan areas bearing the family name of "Tanapathilage gedera" (home of the ambassador.)